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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEALERS IN ANCIENT ART

## IADAA NEWSLETTER APRIL 2020

### ***Dealers are using German auction houses to whitewash relic trade, top art investigator says***

The Times: April 6: Another extraordinarily uninformed article based on a set of claims it doesn't even try to verify, from a notoriously unreliable source that even describes himself as "Inspector Clouseau".

At heart, this article has been cobbled together on the back of the ILLICID recommendations and the press release issued by the British Museum about the new CircArt database (for both, see last month's newsletter). Both sources are shot full of holes, for the reasons set out in the January newsletter and in earlier IADAA reports, but The Times article goes way beyond these, basing almost its entire premise on the utterly unsubstantiated claims by Brand, who asserts here that:

- Germany is a market blackspot because of immigrants from Turkey and the Middle East;
- Art smugglers use German auction houses to lend looted items credibility;
- Conflicts in Syria and Iraq over the past decade have led to a "surge in the illegal market for antiquities", although the only example it can come up with is from 2009.

Even worse, Brand asserts: "Most collectors don't ask too many questions. The legal art world comes to those auctions to buy, and meets the illegal art world that comes there to sell."

He supports a further claim that dealers who turn up at these auctions must be criminals because they know each other.

<https://bit.ly/2RihM37>

### ***Almost 98 Percent of 'Eastern Mediterranean' antiquities sold in Germany are of questionable origin, a new report has found***

Artnet News: April 6: This article follows on from similar articles published in March as it refers to the follow-up recommendations from the ILLICID report. Like so many other articles, because the recommendations have been published

by the Federal Ministry, what it has to say has been taken on trust and no questions asked as to how a 50-page report of recommendations can be created from an analytical report of just nine pages, at least half of which is taken up with explaining the study's methodology. (See the follow-up below)

<https://bit.ly/2Rp4lyc>

### ***UK curator criticises 'misleading' reports about looted items***

The Guardian: April 10: St John Simpson, a senior curator and archaeologist in the British Museum's Middle East department denounced the ILLICID report and its '98%' as misleading. "Reporting of the illegal trade in antiquities from Iraq and Syria is leading to a false impression that the European market is flooded with looted items," The Guardian reported him as saying.

"There's a very strong tendency to say that all objects without provenance are the produce of recent looting," he said. "But some objects have been circulating for decades, if not longer. It's a case of assessing each item on its own merits." Notably he added that in his role as an adviser for UK law enforcement on items that have been seized on exit or entry into the country, there has yet to be a proven case of a recently looted item from Syria being discovered in Britain. He said: "I think the really telling statistic is that over the last eight years of the Syrian civil war we have yet to prove any objects have come into Britain that demonstrably come from looting in Syria," he said. "We are investigating cases at the moment but that is a remarkable figure."

Kate Fitz Gibbon of Cultural Property News has conducted an in-depth interview with Dr Simpson (see second link below), in which he expands further on his views, both on the ILLICID study and the wider topic of antiquities and looting.

To give an idea of what he has to say, here are his introductory views on the ILLICID report: "The key fact about the ILLICID report is that out of the sample of the 356,500 objects that they say they looked at, only 0.1% were identified by them as genuine pieces from Syria or Iraq. That is very telling. I think it implies that there is a considerable amount of hyperbole about the volume of trafficking from those countries at least, even though there has sadly been a lot of destruction across the country. That hyperbole is something that we've seen in a lot of press stories over the last few years. Compare that to the fact that in the last nine years, we've not seen a single antiquity entering Britain or passing through Britain from Daesh-controlled areas of either Syria or Iraq. That's despite the fact that the UK is a major transport hub and there has been very high-risk profiling of individuals and freight from Daesh-controlled areas. We have also yet to see any objects on the market which we can show might have been stolen from the Mosul Museum in 2015.

I think that the absence of any such objects that we can demonstrably prove comes from these past nine years of conflict is very telling. It's in complete

contrast to the decade-long period from 1993-94 to 2003-2004 in Iraq where the satellite imagery of the ground matched the market picture.”

Looking to the future, Dr Simpson praises the Iraqis for their approach to law enforcement: “The Iraqis have a got a very well-trained and very intelligent archaeological police service who operate jointly with the Ministry of the Interior and the State Board of Antiquities and heritage. They patrol the landscape, talk to locals, they follow up on any reports of looting, and they protect the archaeologists, museums and monuments.”

IADAA recommends reading the interview in full.

<https://bit.ly/34SA4gJ>

<https://bit.ly/2SkvFyj>

### ***A new report says Germany is a hotspot for the illegal antiquities market. Here's why that's wrong—and dangerous***

Artnet News: April 17: Erika Bochereau, Secretary General of CINOA, the largest federation of Art & Antique Dealer associations in the world, has penned this rebuttal to the ‘98%’ article above, also by Artnet News.

Exposing the way in which the figures have been manipulated, she reveals that although the ILLICID study looked at 385,000 objects, “Fewer than two percent of the items studied—a total of 6,133 objects—“potentially” came from regions of interest around the Middle East, and it was 98 percent of that slice [that was] deemed to be of questionable origin. So the conclusion might be more accurately framed as: just under 0.02 percent of all of the items studied are of ‘questionable origin’.”

Having said that, she goes on to explain why they were deemed “questionable”, further exposing the misleading nature of the study: “The suspicion about origin is largely based on what the researchers see as incomplete provenance history, including the absence of previous owners’ names, despite the fact that data protection rules prevent this in many cases. The absence of full documentation for antiquities that have been circulating in the market for years is not only commonplace, but the norm.”

The article continues to explain why documentary evidence may be lacking and covers the standard explanations that are widely known in the market and beyond.

“None of these scenarios gives rise to suspicion of crime, yet the ILLICID report—and the ministry recommendations arising from it—act as though it does,” writes Bochereau.

Providing further evidence as to why the assumptions made by the study – even before it had begun to research the subject – were wrong, she concludes: “It is quite frankly scandalous that despite the failure of the ILLICID study to back up its initial assumptions with hard evidence, the Federal Ministry of Research appears now to have manipulated the results to pursue its original agenda.”

<https://bit.ly/3eCs6Np>

### ***ISIS the art dealer***

The Regulatory Review: April 13: This article, an opinion piece by a senior editor at this influential University of Pennsylvania publication, regurgitates much material that has been dismissed as inaccurate by all parties to this debate for some time now, as well as giving further credence to statistical claims that have no basis in fact other than being derived from unnamed sources in media articles several years old.

The research behind it appears to be an extended Googling exercise without any proper checking of sources, resulting in a series of conclusions not based on clear facts. IADAA submitted a detailed critique of this piece, setting out point by point the extent of the errors and failure to check sources properly, to the Editor-in-Chief who promised to investigate. Having not heard back 12 days later, IADAA contacted her again. This time she responded, stating no more than that they had conducted “a thorough review” of the article and stood by it. She did not address any of the more than 20 points IADAA raised challenging the article. The Review publishes a policy on Submissions on its website, stating “accepted submissions typically undergo multiple rounds of review and exchange with authors before being scheduled for publication”. If so, then something seems to have gone badly wrong on this occasion, bearing in mind the highly sensitive nature of the subject matter.

<https://bit.ly/2Kkefx4>

### ***Christ Church professor arrested over scandal of stolen papyrus***

The Oxford Blue: April 16: Oxford Professor Dirk Obbink has been arrested over the theft of ancient papyri from the Sackler Classics Library in the city. An Associate Professor in Papyrology and Greek Literature, he is also a Fellow and Tutor in Greek at Christ Church, Oxford.

“Professor Obbink, who has denied any wrongdoing, was suspended from his duties at the University in October 2019 following allegations that he had stolen up to 120 pieces of ancient papyrus owned by the Egypt Exploration Society collection, housed in the Sackler Library,” the article reports.

So far, 13 of the missing pieces have been located in the Museum of the Bible in Washington and another six in the collection of Mr Andrew Stimer in California. Both collections are returning these fragments to the Society.

<https://bit.ly/2yyYVdw>

### ***Arab looters use pandemic lull in law enforcement to rob ancient treasures***

Jewish Press: April 23: This article raises the issue of conflicting priorities in protecting vulnerable sites. It does appear to show current looting. The article

focuses on the consequences of the Israelis cutting back law enforcement guarding the sites by 70% in the coronavirus crisis. “...as a result, grave robbers and treasure hunters have been roaming unmolested throughout the ancient sites of Judea and Samaria. A week ago, members of Shomrim Al Hanetzach reported a particularly intense robbery dig, in a cave located inside the Mount Kabir Nature Reserve, between Elon Moreh and the Jordan Valley.”

<https://bit.ly/2VGI4P6>

### ***Cyprus accuses British company of illegally excavating ancient shipwrecks***

Cyprus Mail: April 24: The Cypriot authorities have accused a private British company of illegally excavating ancient shipwrecks in the eastern Mediterranean and “violently extracting objects, causing destruction to their context”.

The Cypriots claim that Enigma Recoveries, who unveiled salvage from a dozen wrecks in the Levantine Basin, were guilty of illicit underwater excavations. The statement came in response to accusations by Enigma, which completed the excavations in 2015, that instead of putting items on display in museums, the Cypriot antiquities department was planning to sell them off at auction.

The authorities have dismissed the accusations, saying that they have recorded the items according to archaeological practice and that it was Enigma Recoveries who planned to sell the items.

The finds include Chinese porcelain, Ottoman artefacts and pieces from around a dozen other cultures.

The second link below, from Diver.Net, reveals that the Cypriot authorities impounded the artefacts when Enigma Recoveries brought them back to their base in Limassol five years ago.

Cyprus has recently amended the law to provide further protection to underwater cultural heritage.

<https://bit.ly/2yR5loi>

<https://bit.ly/2SeRPBS>

### ***Online antiquities smugglers are taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis***

The Art Newspaper: April 29: This is an update from the Athar Project which launched last year (see July 2019 Newsletter). Essentially, further monitoring of social media by the project claims to point to an increase in illicit activity, including information sharing on where to dig to the offering of artefacts online on places such as Facebook groups.

“According to Katie Paul, the co-director of ATHAR Project, their researchers have seen an increase in the number of posts with photographs showing the act of looting—a move intended to demonstrate to prospective buyers that they



have authentic goods—as well as posts of images of excavations shared by looters to gather information from other group members as to the potential richness of their chosen dig site,” the article continues.

Paul attributes this increase in activity to a mix of factors including “favourable spring weather”, increased global access to the internet and, specifically for this period, greater vulnerability of sites as a result of protective measures being reduced as a result of the pandemic.

How extensive the problem is cannot be gauged exactly, partially because so many fakes are offered; however, ATHAR says that it monitors more than 120 Facebook groups, “each of which can have anywhere from a few hundred to 300,000 followers”, with the largest of those having around 175 posts a day. “Paul says that while ATHAR continues to advocate for more stringent policies to stop the online trade of looted antiquities, it is paramount to preserve the existing data because it is a record of these objects’ provenance, so they cannot be passed off on the black market as so-called “orphan artefacts”.”

Whatever the findings of the ATHAR Project, the comments from British Museum senior curator St John Simpson in his role as an adviser for UK law enforcement (see entry above) are notable in this context as they point to existing UN Security Council sanctions on imports from Syria and Iraq being effective. To repeat, he says: “I think the really telling statistic is that over the last eight years of the Syrian civil war we have yet to prove any objects have come into Britain that demonstrably come from looting in Syria,” he said. “We are investigating cases at the moment but that is a remarkable figure.”

Facebook has been actively seeking dialogue with expert stakeholders in academia and the legitimate antiquities market, as well as others, to see what can be done about the problem.

The Facebook Content Policy Team first made contact with the Antiquities Dealers’ Association in October 2019 for advice on improving its policies. Among other pieces of advice, the ADA told Facebook that they would be happy to see all sales of antiquities on Facebook banned, due to the associated reputational damage to the legitimate trade. However, as Facebook pointed out, even if it did this, people can still link up via its platform and even now the sales take place elsewhere. In addition, pinpointing criminality is hugely difficult because users use language to mask what they are actually talking about. While Facebook are used to having to deal with other high risk areas such as alcohol, tobacco, firearms and human body parts, historical artefacts present a unique problem because many pieces are unique and the sector is hard to define.

They also told the ADA that it is difficult to strike the right balance between restrictions and personal freedoms. Facebook told the ADA it is continuing to review its policy in response to concerns and expects to announce an update soon.

All of this demonstrates clearly why IADAA has spent so much of its efforts calling on international NGOs like UNESCO, as well as law enforcement and governments, to make much more of a priority of protecting vulnerable sites. Quite apart from their obligations to do so under Article 5 of the UNESCO Convention, it is strikingly obvious that by focusing on cutting off the problem at source by preventing the looting of sites, the authorities will be much more effective in reducing the after effects, such as increased criminal activity via social media, which is almost impossible to police as things stand.

<https://bit.ly/3bP337S>

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