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INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEALERS IN ANCIENT ART

IADAA NEWSLETTER JUNE 2020

ISIS admit to looting oil and ‘obscene amount antiquities’ to swell its war chest

Mirror (UK): June 5: This is another case of a dramatic headline that it is not really held up by the article underneath. Focusing on the jail confessions from captured ISIS leader Abdul Nasser Qardash, the report starts: “Iraqi-born Abdul Nasser Qardash, AKA The Destroyer, confessed in a jail interview that the looting and oil sales funded a multi-million-pound budget to recruit teenage boys and men.”

As the interview continues, Qardash is quoted as stating ““We had an obscene abundance of antiquities. We tried to transfer the relics to Europe to sell them. This is especially true for Syrian relics.”

Note the word “tried”. Nowhere does he claim that they actually succeeded, in contrast to the hundreds of millions of pounds he said they made from oil. Whilst this is an interview with a senior terrorist directly involved, as with other reports confirmation of generating huge sums from looted oil is not matched by confirmation about revenues raised from antiquities. Other sources, meanwhile, have been clear that there is little to no evidence of this being the case, including the RAND Corporation’s extensive report (see last month’s newsletter).

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

Sotheby’s loses case against Greece over ancient bronze horse sculpture

Art Newspaper: June 19: A US court has ruled that Sotheby’s cannot sue Greece for damages after the country expressed doubts about the provenance of an important ancient bronze artefact the auction house was due to sell in 2018.

The judgment was made on the grounds of jurisdiction, with the appeal court ruling that the lower court did not have the power to authorise



the pursuit of the case by Sotheby's. Sotheby's had launched the suit by arguing that the intervention by Greece demanding that the ancient bronze horse pictured here (image courtesy of Sotheby's) be withdrawn from the catalogue – but without supplying evidence to support its case – effectively ruined the sale, forcing the withdrawal.



The Art Newspaper explains that the US appeal court ruling came down in Greece's favour because the country was not acting out of commercial interests, which meant that the court did not have jurisdiction over the matter under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA).

Lawyers involved in the case argued that the ruling meant countries would remain free to challenge sales elsewhere without having to provide evidence of illicit activity.

In a further report (see second link below) the Greek City Times stated that the Greek government would now seek the repatriation of the horse.

However, as Sotheby's told the Art Newspaper, while it was disappointed with the ruling, it did not alter the facts of the case, including the lack of evidence to support the arguments put forward by Greece.

Greek Culture Minister Mendoni told Reuters TV: "Greece has clearly achieved a huge victory - a legal precedent, a judicial precedent, has already been created, and through Greece, it favours all countries from which cultural goods are illegally exported."

However, as other news outlets have pointed out, the ruling makes no reference to the status of the horse itself, nor has Greece or anyone else shown that it was either looted or illegally exported from Greece.

The third link is a legal review of the case.

<https://bit.ly/3f7oouu>

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

<https://bit.ly/2C9iNWs>

British Museum Supports Aims And Objectives Of Black Lives Matter? The Height Of Hypocrisy!

Modern Ghana: June 15: Tying in both the Black Lives Matter protests and Geoffrey Robertson's new book *Who Owns History?* this epic denouncement of

the British Museum focuses on the mismatch between its collection policies and its expressions of support for oppressed peoples.

Taking the Benin bronzes and Tewodros treasure as examples, the article castigates both the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum for what it sees as empty statements of support for equality and social justice in the context of the institutions retaining 'stolen' cultural property.

Targeting the two museum directors, Hartwig Fischer and Tristram Hunt, it continues with a set of demands, including the return of artefacts to African source countries.

Whatever one's beliefs about the validity of the BM and V&A collections, it is clear that attempts by the two directors to 'run with the hare and ride with the hounds' in officially expressing support for a radical review of colonial legacy while continuing to hold on to its rewards is not impressing any of those they hope to win round in the interests of cultural heritage preservation.

<https://bit.ly/2Ypu9y1>

Christie's Quietly Pulls Greek and Roman Antiquities From an Online Auction After Evidence Suggests They May Have Been Looted

Artnet News: June 15: Along with numerous other news reports, this article covers the latest attempt by anti-trade campaigner Christos Tsirogiannis to embarrass Christie's by going to the media over objects catalogued for a forthcoming sale that he says may be stolen.

"Christie's has pulled four Greek and Roman antiquities from an online auction after new evidence arose suggesting they may have been looted," the article reports.

As usual, Tsirogiannis reports that the lots appear in the Becchina archive, to which he has access but the trade and auction houses do not.

What the article does not claim is that these items are actually illicit, but the involvement of Tsirogiannis and his claims are enough to provoke withdrawal. As both Christie's and Antiquities Dealers Association chairman Joanna van der Lande told Antiques Trade Gazette (see second link below), no practical solution has been proposed to deal with checks against the Becchina and Medici archives.

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

Allow access to antiquities files, says Christie's

Antiques Trade Gazette: June 27: Referring to its recent withdrawal of four items from sale following the intervention of Christos Tsirogiannis based on the Becchina archive, Christie's have called for auctioneers and dealers to be granted access to the Becchina and Medici archives for due diligence purposes.

"It continues to frustrate us that we remain excluded from reviewing helpful

archives as part of our pre-sale activities. We wish to consult all relevant information but these archives are still unavailable to us, as they are to other responsible market players,” the company said.

<https://bit.ly/2ZysR3t>

Looting of antiquities has increased under lockdown – here's how we're working to prevent this in Iraq

The Conversation: June 18: Another article making bold claims that are not backed by credible evidence, it even includes the figure of US\$10 million as the estimated daily turnover of the global trade in illicit antiquities, attributing this via a link to a 2010 article by Dr Neil Brodie entitled Archaeological Looting and Economic Justice, although the article does not claim this.

In fact, this Conversation article does not even support its own headline.

What is astonishing is that the article is written by Roger Matthews, Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Reading, an academic who does not appear to vet his sources properly. This is especially concerning as he also reveals himself to be President of RASHID International (Research, Assessment and Safeguarding of the Heritage of Iraq in Danger), which role would surely make it even more incumbent on him to get his facts straight and check data and information sources thoroughly before quoting them as evidence.

Professor Matthews also states that “there is significant evidence that terrorist groups such as Islamic State have benefited from the black market trade in looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria”. Here he links to an article whose sources he has clearly not checked as none of them stand up.

This appears to be exactly the type of article referred to in the RAND Corporation study, which decried the spreading of false claims and the effect they have had on misshaping policy.

All of the above is a shame because the ‘liquid traceability’ system Professor Matthews is promoting here is interesting.

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

Taking stock, moving forward – 50 years of combatting illicit trafficking of cultural property

UNESCO: June 19: With UNESCO marking 50 years of the Convention on cultural property this November, various events have been scheduled, including this one, slated for June 26, in which the Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay says: “We need to step up our efforts to enforce ethical standards in art markets and support countries as they work to safeguard heritage and combat illicit trade”.

As usual, despite all of the promises to the contrary over the past few years, yet another major debate about the art market fails to include a single

representative of the market, instead announcing the same roster of anti-trade campaigners to impart their views to those assembled, including at least one heavily criticised over their ethical behaviour in the recent RAND Report.

IADAA would like to know when UNESCO plans to honour its commitment to include the art market in these debates about its future and to ensure that the information it bases its decisions on is accurate.

It is disappointing that after such a long time and so many attempts to create a constructive dialogue that leads to effective measures for preventing crime associated with antiquities that so little has been achieved.

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

Facebook bans 'loot-to-order' antiquities trade

BBC News: June 23: Just one of many reports on this topic, with Facebook announcing a total ban on trade in 'historical artefacts' or attempts to solicit them on its platform and on Instagram. What is not yet clear is what else, beyond antiquities, is affected, a matter of great importance to antiques dealers in specialisms such as furniture, ceramics and other fields whose main sales platform is now Instagram.

The BBC extensively quotes Amr Al-Azm of the Athar project, who is monitoring Facebook groups offering antiquities. He welcomes the move but states that it does not go far enough.

How widespread the problem is also remains unclear. While Al-Azm and others argue that hundreds of thousands of people are involved, with a recent increase in numbers and activity, possibly as a result of the pandemic, the RAND Corporation study published in May (see last month's newsletter) says its research shows that much of what is being advertised is clearly not looted but involves images lifted from museum websites and news articles in an attempt to deceive potential buyers into parting with cash. However, RAND also state: "Specifically, we found that Facebook is a prominent hub for discussions of antiquities, which may be driving interest in looting by highlighting the wealth that it purportedly generates. By promoting and normalizing looting in Arabic-language groups, Facebook has the potential to drive looting even if there is not sufficient demand in the market to sell the looted goods."

In other words, although RAND's research reveals that not much demand exists for looted material, those who exaggerate the problem – either to increase public pressure on the antiquities trade or to secure funding for projects – effectively encourage looting.

Despite criticism of Facebook, it should be noted that it has been proactive in seeking out the trade associations for discussions on this subject.

<https://bbc.in/3exBwZX>

Gang traded Bronze Age treasures

The Times: June 26: This is an update on the Athena II operation overseen by Europol, which led to the seizure of 4,600 items across Europe, including artefacts ranging from arrow heads to coins and funeral urns.

Of most concern here are the unqualified statements that London is a hub for the trade in illicit antiquities; in recent years artefacts ransacked from Syria and Iraq have turned up in London; and most illicit antiquities are laundered through the legitimate market, the latter credited to Europol.

Our colleagues at the Antiquities Dealers' Association have written in protest to the Times pointing out the following:

- British Museum curator St John Simpson, who advises UK law enforcement in an official capacity, told The Guardian on April 10: “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.” He added: “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. We are investigating cases at the moment but that is a remarkable figure.”
- In her official release regarding the recent Athena II operation to clamp down on trafficking, Europol Executive Director Catherine de Bolle yet again linked antiquities trafficking to that of drugs and weapons, saying “we know that the same groups are engaged, because it generates big money”. However, the RAND Corporation's May report dismissed such claims, stating: “Unsubstantiated claims about the relationship among looting, weapons, drugs, and money laundering are common in both expert and popular publications, and inaccurate or exaggerated estimates of stolen items' value abound.”
- RAND also notes Interpol's 'rare public disclaimer' of similar claims regarding the alleged drugs-weapons-antiquities axis.
- The World Customs Organisation's latest Illicit Trade Report identified drugs as accounting for 32% of all seizures reported by the customs network globally for 2018, while all cultural property, from Contemporary art to ceramics, of which antiquities make up only a small part, accounted for just 0.08%.
- RAND is highly critical of the gross exaggeration of the value of trafficked antiquities globally. Correcting these errors is important because, as RAND notes, the inaccurate but widespread reporting that looting and trafficking of antiquities is a lucrative business simply risks encouraging more people to do it.

We await news of the Times' reaction to this complaint.

<https://bit.ly/2Ahwn9I>

Paris dealer who sold golden sarcophagus to New York's Metropolitan Museum charged with fraud and money laundering

The Art Newspaper: June 27: This is the latest in a series of articles over the previous few days on the detention and questioning of five individuals in Paris, including a dealer and a former curator of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

While the rest were released without charge, Paris dealer Christophe Kunicki and his husband Richard Sampaire have been charged with 'gang fraud and money laundering' before being released on bail, according to this article.

The charges relate to a two-year investigation against art trafficking involving the sale of "hundreds of artefacts from the Middle east for tens of millions of euros", according to an official source.

The belief is that those involved doctored documents to legitimise looted material.

We await further news on this.

<https://bit.ly/2YIc3ru>

Nigeria fails to halt Paris sale of 'stolen' treasures

Art Daily: June 30: Protestors from Nigeria have failed in their attempt to persuade Christie's to withdraw Igbo statues from sale in Paris. While one didn't sell, a pair together made €212,500.

Reportedly from an important European collection, it was claimed by the head of the National Museum in Benin City, Nigeria that the pieces had been stolen during the Biafran War in the late 1960s. This article notes that documentation clearly shows the statues were exported from Nigeria before 2000, as the law required, and argued that they would not have been sold without the agreement of local chiefs.

<https://bit.ly/3gdyBX2>

Waning market for African artefacts? Controversial Benin bronze fails to sell at Christie's:

The Art Newspaper: June 30: This article explores the possible influence of academic opinion on the failure at auction of a bronze plaque from Benin. The article quotes Erin Thompson, an associate professor of art crime at John Jay College in New York, who said after the auction: "I'm hoping buyers are realising that it's not appropriate to collect these pieces and I hope that owners will try to work towards repatriation rather than reselling these objects. I realise it's not fair to ask owners to bear all the financial burden of repatriation but I think that it's possible to work cooperatively with claimant countries to make it fairer for everyone."

<https://bit.ly/31Ca0H9>

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