



Antiquities trafficking charges against former Louvre director Jean-Luc Martinez and curator Jean-François Charnier could be dropped

The Art Newspaper: November 8: Mud sticks when it comes to reputations. But that doesn't seem to matter to those who are eager to point the accusing finger at others without the evidence to back it up.

This was always the risk with the scandal surrounding acquisitions at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The media were as keen as anti-market campaigners and bloggers to publicise the arrest and indictment of former Louvre president Jean-Luc Martinez, and Jean-François Charnier, former scientific director of Agence France Muséums (AFM), which was instrumental in the establishment of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, on trafficking charges related to antiquities.

As we reported in the September newsletter, the *Art Newspaper* revealed that cracks had begun to appear in the prosecution's case when Martinez and Charnier pointed out that neither the AFM, nor the Louvre or its president, are legally responsible for the acquisitions, the intergovernmental contracts stipulating that the AFM exercises a consulting role and that the legal responsibility for acquisitions rests exclusively with the museum of Abu Dhabi and the Emirates.

At the same time, the case was delayed as presiding judge Jean-Michel Gentil, who was reported to have issued European Arrest Warrants against four dealers in Hamburg, unexpectedly quit to take up a post leading the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie on September 1.

Now, as this article notes, a public prosecutor from the court of appeal has asked for all charges against Martinez and Charnier to be dropped. The call goes directly against the advice of investigating magistrates, while the *Art Newspaper* reports: "The public prosecutor advised that there was no substantiating evidence to support the charges against the two men and, furthermore, that the procedure against Martinez was hampered by the late communication of a discovery."

Investigations will continue as the allegations of the Louvre Abu Dhabi acquiring illicit works remain, but the status of the two accused could change. Charnier could become an "assisted witness" – effectively working for the prosecution – while Martinez may be excluded altogether, says the *Art Newspaper*.

Whatever the outcome, the handling of the case so far will have caused severe damage to the pair: "The prosecutor's request casts a shadow over the direction taken by the investigation in targeting the curators," the *Art Newspaper* rightly argues. "Both men have been subjected to widespread media attention following inflammatory leaks to the press, and Charnier was subsequently fired from his post as museum development advisor for the French-Saudi cultural heritage project in the Saudi province of Al-Ula."

The prosecutor has asked for charges against dealer Roben Dib to be maintained, but with the damage done so far, how safe will that prove to be?

Ivory lice comb – a dating head-scratcher – may hold earliest Canaanite sentence

The Times of Israel: November 9: A tiny lice comb (pictured here) found during a 2016 excavation in central Israel has been found to have the first and only known early Canaanite sentence inscribed on it. Dating to the 17th century BC, it reads: "May this tusk root out the

lice of the hair and the beard.” The inscription is said to characterise the very earliest stage of the alphabet’s development.



The 17th century BC inscription on the lice comb.

Photo: Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority

Man repatriates 19 antiquities after reading Guardian article

The Guardian: November 11: An article that makes several unjustified assumptions and led to misreporting in other publications. It tells the story of an American bequeathed a collection of antiquities by his grandmother.

Having read several stories about the repatriation of artefacts, and having little paperwork to confirm their origins, he decided to investigate handing them back. Tellingly, the article reports that “he was initially worried that he could be in trouble with the authorities for having potentially looted the artefacts in his possession”.

The reports he had read that led to his concerns about getting into trouble were also in *The Guardian* and had focused on anti-trade campaigner Christos Tsirogiannis, the academic who takes extremist views against the trade in ancient objects.

He then contacted Tsirogiannis who was delighted at the approach and proposal to return the items, which included seventh and eighth century Cypriot vases. Other objects originated in Greece, Italy and Pakistan.

It transpires that the owner’s grandmother had worked on excavations, particularly in Italy and Greece, during the 1950s and 60s, and had published scholarly papers. Two of the items had receipts, and Tsirogiannis stated that they had links to “known Greek dealers of illicit antiquities”.

Where the article oversteps the mark is in assuming that the owner did the “right thing legally and ethically by returning the items to Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Pakistan respectively”.

Whatever Tsirogiannis’s suspicions – and experience tells us that he would never come up with any other conclusion than the one he expressed – he did not have any evidence that the items were illicit.

Handing them back, then, is a generous rather than legal or ethical gesture, a fact the *Guardian* contradicts in its reporting.

The lack of evidence did not prevent *The Greek City Times* and other publications running the story – lifted wholesale from *The Guardian* – under the headline *American man returns*

stolen Greek antiquities inherited from grandmother, a classic case of propaganda promoting fake news as facts.

Switzerland and Turkey sign agreement on cultural property

Swissinfo: November 15: Switzerland and Turkey have signed a bilateral agreement on the international transfer of cultural property covering archaeological objects dating from prehistoric times to 1500 AD. Switzerland provides the wording of such agreements, whose key paragraph is as follows: “Whoever imports or transits cultural property subject to an agreement into or through Switzerland must document to the customs authorities the export provisions of the foreign contracting state are fulfilled. If the foreign contracting state requires a permit to export such cultural property, the permit must be presented to the customs authorities (Art. 24 para. 3 Cultural Property Transfer Ordinance; SR 444.11).”

French report says stolen Libyan antiquities are sold in France and England's auctions

Libya Observer: November 19: Another TV programme and another report regarding trafficking. This article is notable for reporting that Morgan Belzic, the French archaeologist investigating this issue, “pointed out that the illegal trade in cultural property occupies the third place among international criminal activities after trafficking in weapons and drugs”. If this article is accurate, it doesn’t say much for Belzic’s due diligence in checking facts, especially when this claim is so widely known to be bogus. It is also a claim that is often blamed for encouraging looters to steal more. If Belzic has been misquoted, he might like to seek a retraction from the authors of this article.

A Piece of an Egyptian Goddess Figure, Found at an Iron Age Settlement in Spain, Has Stunned Archeologists

Artnet News: November 24: A new discovery in Spain raises fresh questions as to the relationship between ancient Egypt and Iron Age Spain.

The discovery of a ceramic fragment of the figure of an ancient Egyptian goddess at the site of Cerro de San Vicente, at Salamanca in north-western Spain took archaeologists by surprise.

“It is the latest in a string of new finds at the site, including jewelry and ceramics adorned with Egyptian motifs,” the article reports.

“Another portrait of Hathor, this time a blue quartz amulet, was found by the research team in the summer of 2021. It was made in ancient Egypt and reached the Iberian Peninsula in around 1,000 B.C.”

Archaeologist Carlos Macarro said he could imagine Phoenicians arriving carrying the objects.



How the inlay fragment would have fitted into the portrait of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, found in August. Image courtesy of the University of Salamanca.

The International Council Of Museums Publishes A Red List Of Cultural Property In Danger In Ukraine

Globe Echo: November 25: ICOM has published an emergency Red List of Ukrainian cultural property at risk because of the current conflict with Russia. The urgency of publishing was underlined by fears of looting at the Kherson Art Museum during the withdrawal of Russian forces on November 11.

Syria recovers 35K stolen artifacts during 11-yr war: Official

Xinhua: November 28: Firas Dadoukh, Director of Cultural Relations and Head of the Professional Development Department at the Directorate of Antiquities and Museum, has revealed that Syria has recovered 35,000 artefacts *within its borders* that were looted during the recent conflict with ISIS.

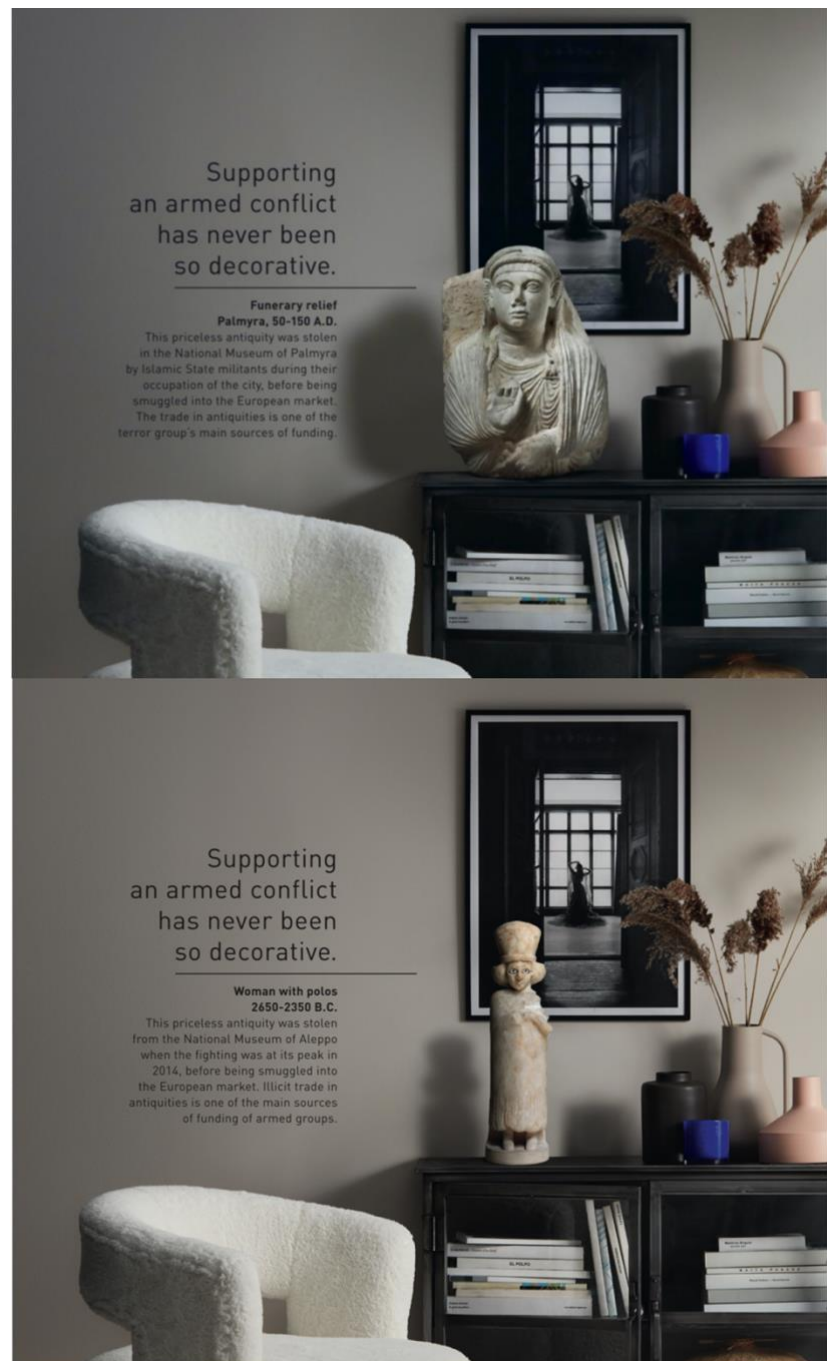
The announcement was made during an exhibition of recovered archaeological artefacts at the Syrian national museum.

It is reassuring to learn that so much of what has been looted has remained in the country and has now been recovered. It is equally notable that despite claims to the contrary, looted material has not been turning up in western markets.

An indicator of just how difficult it has been for the authorities to identify any trafficked material in the west is UNESCO's fraudulent campaign *The Real Price of Art*, from November 2020. As newsletter subscribers will remember, IADAA uncovered the fraud after becoming suspicious about the inclusion of a funerary relief from Palmyra, which UNESCO claimed had been stolen from the National Museum by Islamic State militants, "before being smuggled into the European market". As it turned out, none of this was true and

the image – of a legitimate piece long held in a public collection – had been lifted from the archives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York without the museum's knowledge. Arguably more damning was what UNESCO did when caught out, replacing the image with one of an ancient statuette, woman with polos, dating to 2650-2350 BC, which it claimed had been stolen from the National Museum in Aleppo "when the fighting was at its peak in 2014, before being smuggled into the European market". This also turned out to be false when a video of the reopening of the museum in 2019 showed the statuette clearly on show in a display case. Both fraudulent adverts are shown here.

One must ask: if so much had been looted and trafficked abroad to western markets, why did UNESCO have to fake its campaign in this way? Why did it not simply use an image of something that had genuinely been taken if there so many items to choose from?



The answer comes from an unlikely source: Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, Assistant District Attorney of New York and head of the department's Antiquities Unit. He is arguably the highest profile scourge of the antiquities trade in the world.

At the Clyde & Co seminar in London on July 11, 2017, when asked how many arrests/prosecutions there had been in the US, UK and Europe linked to ISIS-looted material, and how much recovered, he said none and nothing, adding: "None of this stuff is going to turn up for years, if not decades."

Almost a decade on from the beginning of the war, this remains the case, as evidenced by the absence of material that has turned up despite numerous operations seeking it by Interpol, Europol, national police forces and customs, as well as countless studies, many funded by either the European Union or national governments.

Egyptians call on British Museum to return Rosetta stone

ABC News: November 30: A notable feature of this article is the revival of an unattributed six-year-old claim published by the Antiquities Coalition: "Amid turmoil following the 2011 uprising that toppled autocrat Hosni Mubarak, Egypt saw an uptick in artifact smuggling, which cost the country an estimated \$3 billion between 2011 and 2013, according to the U.S.-based Antiquities Coalition."

What the original 2016 article, titled Blood Antiquities, stated was: "Exact numbers are tough to come by, but the trend is definitely upward. Since the 2011 Revolution in Egypt, some US\$3 billion in losses in this ancient land have been attributed to "cultural racketeering" – the systemic looting and trafficking of heritage. This figure does not include the intentional destruction and trafficking of antiquities in the "cradle of civilization," which spans 10,000 years of human history and is under the partial control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), where the losses are even higher."

So many questions arise over the credibility of this claim beyond the ridiculous values quoted, as it piles assumption on assumption.

The Antiquities Coalition did not give a source for the claim at the time, nor explain it further, so its real meaning remains opaque. However, that has not prevented other media sources interpreting the figure as applying to the value of antiquities trafficked, so creating another piece of fake news.

The 2020 RAND Report, which was particularly critical of the Antiquities Coalition's claims and approach, saying figures it has quoted, including the \$3 billion, have misled the public.

The new vandals – How museums turned on their own collections

The Spectator: December 1: Written by the well-known author and commentator Douglas Murray, this piece is a timely counterblast against the attack on museums and their collections by critics of the colonial period. The movement has close connections to those who seek to destroy private collections and trade in artworks and artefacts, along with those who argue that everything should be returned to its country of origin, regardless of its legal status, as a mark of cultural patrimony.

Murray uses the current treatment of the Pitts Rivers Museum collection in Oxford as his focus. The museum, he writes, "is now dominated by signs telling you that the collection is a terrible thing".

"Huge billboards tell the visitor that the museum is 'a footprint of colonialism', is 'not a neutral space' and yet 'can be an instrument of resistance'. Throughout the collection we are repeatedly hectored about 'imperialism and colonialism', naturally, but also colonial attitudes towards 'race, class, culture, gender and sexuality'."

Murray goes on to point out that this approach is far from unique, arguing that the trustees of the Tate now think that their job is not to conserve or even explain their collection, but to condemn it. Their misinterpretation of Rex Whistler's celebrated mural – now sealed off from public inspection – is a case in point.

Worse has been the recent closure of the Wellcome Collection's permanent Medicine Man exhibition in London at the hands of those employed to guard and promote it, in protest at its origins and the man who funded it.

Murray advises against what he describes as 'self-flagellation' by institutions like this: "Once you begin to shut yourself down, there is only one logical end point: total self-destruction", adding: "The aim is no longer to collect and curate but actively to dismantle."

He also notes that "while the negative aspects of all other cultures are ignored entirely (slavery in Benin, anyone?), the iniquity of Europeans is stressed everywhere."

Meanwhile an academic on the Museum Association highlights the problem with 'the overwhelming whiteness' of cultural institutions.

"Well, in my observation there is an overwhelming blackness in those museums that exist in Africa, an overwhelming Chineseness in museums in China and an overwhelming Egyptianness about museums in Egypt," Murray responds. "Only in the West, and especially in this country, do we decide that our past is so appalling that it needs to be 'decolonised' – which we can now see means assaulted, insulted and eventually closed."