



[British Museum update](#)



The British Museum. Image courtesy of the British Museum.

The media has shown great interest in the trade's opinion about the British Museum scandal since Dr Ittai Gradel blew the whistle on thefts there and the management's failure to deal with the issue. Doubtless more will emerge in the coming months, but it certainly seems that this crisis will lead to a wholesale review of policy and priorities across museums globally.

IADAA adviser Ivan Macquisten told [The Guardian](#) that strenuous efforts must now be made to recover what can be identified, going into more detail in the [Art Newspaper](#), with further comments in *The Times* and *Antiques Trade Gazette* and *El Pais*.

IADAA chairman Vincent Geerling drove home the point in *Antiques Trade Gazette*. Noting that the BM probably did not have the necessary digital images of many of the lost items, he said: "Their best chance of recovering anything is to involve the trade and auction houses. Furthermore, the museum has to be prepared to compensate the innocent buyers and offer them to reimburse the price paid." The BM, meanwhile, did not answer ATG's request for comment.

ADA chairman Joanna van der Lande has also been much sought after on the subject of the BM, conducting an interview with *Die Welt*, in which she argued that if the BM was unable to control its holdings, the same was probably true of many other institutions: "As long as every single object is not listed in a museum, there is no security," she said.

This chimed with *Artnet News'* article [A Weak Cataloguing System Made It Easy to Steal From the British Museum. Institutions Around the Globe Are Reckoning With the Same Vulnerabilities](#), which stated: "The British Museum missed its chance to appropriately crack down on the thefts in early 2021, when [dealer Ittai Gradel](#) alerted the museum about suspicious artifacts that were appearing on eBay. Though his suspicions were first aroused

by Higgs' eBay account in 2016, it would take Gradel years to amass enough evidence to approach the museum. Why? Of the 70 items that he personally bought and many more that he observed over the years, only three were listed on the British Museum's website and could therefore be proven to have been stolen."

The reason these comments are important is that they represent the first time the wider media has shown an active interest in key issues involving the trade that have been largely overlooked until now.

Few understand the trade's vital role in helping museums, with expertise and donations; its key role in alerting the authorities to wrongdoing, as happened with the British Museum crisis; and the unhealthy disdain that curators and public institutions have developed for the trade in the wake of ill-advised political pressure, and how that has led to the collapse of the CircArt database project at the British Museum, which cost a total of around €1.7m.

Further detailed analysis by the [Art Newspaper](#) focuses on the timeline of events and questions the role of the trustees, as well as the speed with which the chairman, George Osborne responded to Dr Gradel's alerts. The article argues that what appears to be a sequence of poor responses has left the museum vulnerable in several ways, notably in its search for a long-term replacement director.

As Van der Lande told *Die Welt*, the substantial increase, in recent years, restitution claims from source countries have proved overwhelming, leaving curators and museum directors little time to focus on core activities such as cataloguing. She also highlighted other often overlooked factors, such as the fact that the trade works closely with law enforcement and the government in the UK to raise standards and prevent crime

Macquisten told *El Pais* that the British Museum crisis was probably the result of several causes: ineffective management and development of systems; lack of resources; institutional malaise; and the pressure in recent years to prioritise political concerns such as decolonization; diversity, equality, climate change and restitution over traditional disciplines such as cataloguing and curatorship.

A *Telegraph* report of August 31 ([British Museum appoints 'well-respected' scientist to replace deputy director amid theft scandal](#)) confirmed that administrative changes had had an effect, noting that Dr Jonathan Williams, the deputy director who ran operations and had stepped back pending the investigation, had "Williams pushed through unpopular administrative changes that left responsibility for documenting the collection of eight million objects under the stewardship of 'effectively one person'."

It explained how this happened: "In 2019, a further centralisation took place which formed the department of Collections Care, a move which was intended to assign documentation work to a small team, but in practice forced the bulk of these duties onto one 'Inventory Manager', according to insiders."

Due diligence and provenance research

As well as numerous calls for the repatriation of items from the British Museum, the scandal has prompted several articles about due diligence and what that means. An interview by US broadcaster *GPB*, [Report: Emory's Carlos Museum holds objects linked to illicit antiquities trade](#), focuses on the Atlanta museum's acquisition practices after it returned a looted artefact to Iraq. The museum's problems stemmed from the ambitious acquisition programme of a young curator in the late 1990s following a \$10 million donation to the institution, according to the journalist being interviewed.

Denver Art Museum published an article on September 6, [Provenance Research and Cultural Property Update](#), updating the public on its due diligence policies. Acknowledging past problems with acquisitions from traffickers in Asian art, such as Douglas Latchford and

Subash Kapoor, it states: “As a result of research and new information, many works connected to those individuals have been removed from the museum’s collections and repatriated to their countries of origin, with others awaiting next steps for return. You can find the most recent repatriation announcements on our [Provenance Research page](#).” It also sets out some of the steps it takes in the process of researching provenance. Forbes Magazine published an on ethics and morals associated with returning artefacts, [Do The Right Thing: Returning Looted or Stolen Art \(and How Not to Buy It in the First Place\)](#). Setting out the sort of warning signs that might indicate an object has been looted, trusts and estates lawyer Matthew Erskine, writes: “There are several common indications that an artwork might be stolen or looted. First, if the artwork lacks a clear provenance or ownership history, it raises a red flag. Second, if the artwork has been unlawfully removed from a museum, church, or archaeological site, it should be approached with caution. Third, if the artwork has been illegally exported from its country of origin, there is cause for concern. Fourth, if the artwork has been sold or offered for sale by an untrustworthy dealer, it is wise to exercise prudence. Lastly, if the artwork appears on a stolen art database, such as Art Recovery Group's Art Claim, it is important to proceed with thorough verification of its ownership history before making a purchase.” This advice begs the question: how do you know if it has been unlawfully removed from a protected site, or illegally exported? And if it has been illegally excavated, it won’t appear on any database, because no one will know of its existence. The article provides an eight-point list for conducting due diligence but takes no account of the value of an object in the process. Is a collector or dealer going to pay a significant fee of around \$100 or more to see if a low-value object appears on a stolen art database? Point 2 is “Verify the ownership history of the artwork before making a purchase.” Whilst some verification may be necessary, ultimately the best protection is a guarantee from the seller. The list is useful, especially for more expensive pieces, but the sort of caveats mentioned here also need to be highlighted. It concludes: “... transferring ownership to the government for repatriation, as exemplified by the Worcester Art Museum, aligns with property laws and represents the morally right course of action. Objects of this nature should be returned to their rightful owners or to the countries or cultures from which they originated if there is any doubt regarding their true ownership. To safeguard yourself from such situations, diligent research and thoroughness are imperative.” Bearing in mind that the illicit status of the Worcester Art Museum objects is far from being established, this seems to be a little premature.

Recovering the stolen items

As [LBC announced](#) on September 26, the BM has [launched a web page](#) to help in recovering the estimated 2,000 items stolen and reveals that 60 have been recovered with another 300 identified and soon to return.

Most of the missing items are ancient Greek and Roman valuables including gems and jewellery, and an international team of experts has been given the task of tracking them down.

Once the perpetrator has been confirmed, checking their financial records would be the logical way of finding the good faith buyers to whom they sold the objects.

It was reported that the BM had followed advice – presumably from the Art Loss Register, with whom it is co-operating by publishing the losses on its database – not to publish images of the missing items, a decision that will certainly make it harder for the trade and public to help in the recovery process.

This is confusing as the web page itself depicts a number of objects. What is not made clear is whether they are among the stolen items or not.

LBC quotes ALR Director of Recoveries James Ratcliffe as saying: “The British Museum's approach has carefully balanced the need to provide information to the public to assist the recovery efforts with the fact that providing too much detail risks playing into the hands of those who might act in bad faith.

“Thanks to our position as the principal due diligence resource for the art market, and experience in the recovery of stolen art and cultural property, the Art Loss Register has an unrivalled ability to assist with the Museum’s recovery programme.”

Why should the ALR assume that buyers would act in bad faith, particularly when it was the buyers who raised the alarm over the thefts in the first place?

The strategy of not clearly identifying the stolen objects in the quest for recovery overlooks an important point: by not being transparent over exactly what the museum is trying to recover, those involved are effectively tainting every other gem on the market of the relevant periods, from around 1500 BC up until the 19th century. It is difficult to see how this half-hearted policy benefits anyone, not even the BM itself.

The role of the museum

Victoria & Albert Museum director Sir Tristram Hunt argues in *The National News* of the UAE that *Decisions on repatriating museum artefacts should be about the objects - not the politics*. As with the BM, the V&A is restricted by law from repatriating objects from their collections. “Given these constraints, one of our strategies at the V&A is to develop Renewable Cultural Partnerships – long-term loans of artefacts to source nations, and building around them programmes of conservation, curatorial exchange, knowledge-sharing and partnership,” Hunt writes.

While colonialism and other past ills need to be considered alongside the rightful return of stolen artefacts, Hunt believes that a wholesale emptying of Western museums is wrong.

“Every museum should be able to account for the provenance and purpose of its collections, including interrogating their colonial or imperial origins. But that should not result in the negation of museums’ role as spaces to explore, understand and admire foreign cultures and ethnic differences. Museums are places of multiculturalism and exchange, cultural appreciation and appropriation – and that means not limiting themselves solely to displaying their own nation’s artefacts.”

As source countries use the scandal as a further reason to demand the repatriation of items from the BM, *Middle East Monitor* reports that Egypt has launched an investigation into the matter. “The council stressed that Egypt will continue to take all necessary measures to recover any artefact proven to have left Egypt illegally, out of a desire to preserve the country’s ancient heritage,” it notes, while former Egyptian Minister of Antiquities and Tourism, Dr Zahi Hawas, is reported as warning that the British Museum is not a safe place for antiquities.

This story is far from over, but if the long-term impact is effective restructuring of priorities, a better interaction between the trade and institutions, and a more sympathetic view of why the trade matters and the role it has to play, then it will have been worth it.

In the meantime, a new interim director of the BM has been announced. Sir Mark Jones was the director of the V&A in London from 2001 to 2011, having previously been the inaugural director of National Museums Scotland. He has worked at the British Museum before, as assistant keeper of Coins and Medals from 1974 to 1990.

Opus Ancient Arts, an attractive specialised fair in the heart of Paris.

From our correspondent: September 20: Located in the Marais, one of the nicest neighbourhoods in Paris, Opus 2023 opened its doors in Galerie Joseph, a venue with a perfect fit for the purpose. Spread over two stories, 15 participants, of which 12 were members of IADAA, presented their treasures. They came from various European countries and even from the USA to meet collectors and museum curators who, in their turn, had sometimes travelled a significant distance to enjoy the beautiful and interesting objects on offer. There was a lively atmosphere and many objects changed hands. At specialised fairs like this, one always notices old acquaintances meeting and having a drink together. On Sunday, September 24, as the fair closed, participants expressed their wish to repeat the experience next year.



La fin et les moyens (The end and the means)

Gazette de l'Hôtel Drouot: September 1: Influential journalist Vincent Noce picks up on the Brodie & Yates report highlighting the fake claims regarding the size of trade in illicit antiquities. IADAA covered the issue extensively in the July 2023 newsletter, but has been promoting similar arguments and evidence for years, so welcomes the confirmation by these researchers, and now Mr Noce's take on the issue.

As he and the report's authors rightly point out, those irresponsible enough to carelessly repeat the false claim that illicit traffic in antiquities is third only to that in drugs and weapons undermine effective action against it. "It undermines confidence in institutions, creates a point of contention with the market and, above all, risks leading to inappropriate public policies," Noce advises – echoing exactly what IADAA has been saying for years. Perhaps now the European Commission, UNESCO and others who have been guilty of adopting the false propaganda and ignoring the facts in pursuit of their agendas will reflect on this. If they take it as seriously as they need to, then the Commission, in particular,

should revisit the import licensing regulation 2019/880, due to be enforced from June 2025, which was brought in on the basis of such false information.

For the Right Price, Guests at a Luxury Retreat in Egypt Can Help Archaeologists Dig for Cleopatra's Long-Lost Tomb

Artnet News: August 30: While education and cultural tourism are to be welcomed, the idea that wealthy visitors might actually take part in excavations is certainly a curious concept. "Participants will be able to explore shafts and tunnels that the archaeology team previously uncovered and observe what the company called "cutting-edge robots" being used to digitally map the area and create three-dimensional models of the structures Martinez believes guards Cleopatra's tomb," Artnet News reports.

Fortunately, the details given here point to any involvement being observational rather than active, but it is important that the Egyptian authorities do not overlook the need to preserve sites from contamination or damage as they develop this initiative.

Statue believed to depict Marcus Aurelius seized from Cleveland museum in looting investigation

The Independent: August 31: Another seizure by the New York District Attorney's office resulting from claims that this statue was trafficked through New York in the 1980s. Few details have yet emerged as to the validity of the claim by Turkey, but the museum, which has housed the statue since 1986, said that the country had provided no evidence to support its position when demanding the return of the statue and nearly two dozen objects in 2012.

An article on [Axios](#) goes into more detail regarding the issues at hand. It states that Turkey has maintained for over a decade that the statue of Aurelius and dozens of other artifacts, including a statue of Marcus Aurelius's daughter valued at \$3 million, were looted in the 1960s from a Roman archaeological site in the ancient city of Bubon.

[ARTnews](#) notes that "according to museum officials told NBC, that there is 'limited information' about the artifact's provenance". If so, it begs the question as to exactly what evidence exists to support Turkey's claim. The warrant issued for the seizure quotes reasonable cause to believe the statue is stolen but provides no further details. Turkey and the United States only signed a Memorandum of Understanding restricting the import of Turkish artefacts to the US in 2021, so this would not cover the statue. Turkey's attempts to reclaim the Guennol Stargazer failed on appeal after a US court decided that Turkey had slept on its claim, having been aware of the object's presence in the US decades before acting, and also failed to provide evidence that the piece had been illegally exported.

US and Yemen sign cultural property agreement

September 1: "The US and Yemen have signed a bilateral cultural property agreement that renews and extends protections for Yemeni cultural property that were put in place in 2020 on an emergency basis, the US State Department announced on Friday."

[Coin World](#) tells a different story in U.S. extends emergency import rules with Yemen, based on the views of cultural property lawyer and executive director of the Ancient Coin Collectors Guild Peter Tompa.

The agreement is actually an extension of emergency measures put in place in 2020 to address the immediate crisis in Yemen. The problem with this, according to Tompa, is that the new agreement has not been subjected to the usual scrutiny before adoption.

As he notes in his [culturalpropertyobserver.blogspot.com](#), Memoranda of Understanding should first be vetted by the Cultural Property Advisory Committee (CPAC), which advises

Congress. This has not happened here, and Tompa argues that the failure to follow due process in this case has effectively disenfranchised interest groups.

“It is unclear whether this will result in a change in the current designated list, which implicitly includes the cultural heritage of Yemen’s displaced Jewish minority as well as a wide variety of coin types,” writes Tompa.

“By converting the current ‘emergency import restrictions’ into ones under a MOU, the State Department has prevented CPAC and the public (including concerned Jewish exile and collector groups) from commenting on whether import restrictions should continue for the country, which does not respect the rule of law.”

A Newly Discovered Ancient Gate Means Urbanization Started Earlier Than We Thought

Popular Mechanics: September 2: Archaeologists have found a 5,500-year-old city gate at Tell Erani in Israel during construction works. Its discovery points to urbanisation in Israel starting at least 300 years earlier than previously thought.

“This is the first time that such a large gate dating to the Early Bronze IB has been uncovered,” Emily Bischoff, director of the excavation on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, says in a statement. “To construct the gate and the fortification walls, stones had to be brought from a distance, mudbricks had to be manufactured, and the fortification walls had to be constructed. This was not achieved by one or a few individuals. The fortification system is evidence of social organization that represents the beginning of urbanization.”

Egyptian ex-antiquities minister’s Unesco nomination marred by demolitions

Middle East Eye: September 8: Egypt’s hopes of taking over the directorship of UNESCO have been dealt a blow after reaction to its nominee for the post, former tourism and antiquities minister Khaled al-Anani.

Mr Al-Anani’s candidature for the 2025-29 post was confirmed by the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers, but drew criticism from, among others, Ahmed Aboudouh, associate fellow at Chatham House and non-resident fellow with the Atlantic Council.

The source of the criticism was the Egyptian government’s highly controversial decision to approve the bulldozing of thousands of graves in Cairo’s City of the Dead, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to make way for a new highway.

“Let me add that when he was Minister of Antiquities, he removed monuments from listing and refused to list any new site or building,” Omniya Abdel Barr, a conservation architect and Islamic art historian wrote on X on Thursday.

V&A to look after ancient Yemen stones found in London shop

The Guardian: September 12: The Victoria & Albert Museum has taken temporary possession of four ancient carved stelae from Yemen, after they were discovered on display in an East London interior design shop.

An archaeology enthusiast spotted the stones on display and reported them to the Metropolitan Police who seized them and later handed them to the V&A for conservation pending their return to Yemen when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, they will be exhibited as part of the Culture in Crisis show at the V&A’s East Storehouse from 2025. How the stelae came to be in London is not known, but they are reported as originating from necropolis in Yemen that have been looted in recent years.



The ancient funerary stelae from Yemen hail from necropoli that have been looted in recent years. Photograph: Ed Lyon/V&A Museum in London.jpg

“Gold find of the century” made in Norway

The History Blog: September 9: “A treasure hailed as the “gold find of the century in Norway” has been discovered by a metal detectorist in Rennesøy, an island in southwestern Norway,” this blog begins.

The find in question is a group of Bracteates and beads (shown below) that dates to the late Migration Period (375-568 AD).

The discovery was made on the island of Rennesøy in south-west Norway, by physiotherapist and doctor Erlend Bore, a keen metal detectorist, on June 7.

“The find consists of nine gold bracteates (flat, thin, single-sided medallions that never circulated as actual coins but were often modelled after coins), all of them bearing a stylized horse image, ten gold beads and three gold spiral rings. The total gold weight of the find is just over 100 grams,” the blog reports.



“Archaeologists believe the gold necklace and spiral rings, pictured here, were buried in the 6th century during a time of conflict, plague and upheaval after a volcanic eruption blocked out of the sun in 535-6 A.D. leading to widespread crop failure and famine.”

Raider of the Lost Ark

Princeton Alumni Weekly: September 12: An extended feature on and interview with Edoardo Amagià, a retired Italian antiquities dealer subject to a lengthy investigation over his alleged involvement in looting and trafficking.

“If Amagià is the first name on your provenance, it is stolen. That is well known,” says New York Assistant District Attorney Matthew Bogdanos, giving a hint at the direction the article will take.

Central to the feature – and why it is a useful reflection on times past – is the changing priority of provenance over the years.

Pieces he acquired in the 1980s were often purchased in open markets, “a common practice”, says Amagià. “Where they came from and how they got there, Amagià says he didn’t ask.”

Over the years he sold on and loaned to museums across the United States, including the Princeton University Art Museum, which have now become a target for New York’s antiquities unit, repatriating antiquities to Italy now valued at a total of \$7 million. Bogdanos says Amagià worked with Italy’s tombaroli and has seized the dealer’s “meticulous” records as evidence, while Amagià denies he had anything to do with the tomb raiders. However, he does state the following: “They were never excavated illegally, or they might have been excavated illegally but that was before I bought them, and that no one will know.”

The seized documents include a ledger referred to as the “Green Book”. In what is reported as 1,700 entries for looted antiquities, the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office says that Amagià included the names or initial of the tombaroli he worked with – a claim Amagià disputes.

Amagià is outraged that today’s standards are being applied to the mistakes of the past: “What is absolutely a sickness is that you start applying things that have come up today to a market of 20, 30, 40 years ago.”

The article acknowledges that “While the laws regarding national patrimony are not new, museums’ understanding of them, and adoption of standards meant to help them responsibly acquire artifacts have evolved over the decades.”

However, the article itself relies rather too heavily on the benefit of hindsight, ignoring what was deemed normal and acceptable behaviour by museums and the market alike at the time: “Though they had professional obligations not to contribute to the looting of the world’s history, curators for decades ignored expectations to verify provenance for items they bought and accepted gifts from donors who had done the same.”

The Princeton museum’s own director, James Steward (in written answers), notes this: “Probing questions are asked of all potential new acquisitions in ways that were not standard in the industry prior to the 21st century,” the museum statement said. “Indeed, our standards are now among the highest in the industry.”

Stunning 2,000-year-old Roman sculpture of the son of Neptune is found buried less than two feet deep next to the A2 in Kent

Mail Online: September 13: “A 'spectacular' Roman sculpture has been found buried little more than a foot deep next to an A-road in Kent,” the report begins.

The object in question is a 70cm wide stone statue of Triton riding on a sea monster, which was found close to the Roman road of Watling Street. The head had been broken off the body but has now been restored. Calling the find 'spectacular', Dr Richard Hobbs, senior curator of Roman Britain at the British Museum, said: "Nothing quite like this has been discovered before."



A Dubious Greek Antiquities Exhibit Brings Florida Curator's Dismissal

The National Herald: September 19: A ground-breaking exhibition designed to look at ancient Greek civilisation in a new way has become embroiled in scandal after its curator was fired. Michael Bennett, the curator of the St Petersburg Museum in Florida, found himself in the eye of a storm when staff at Denver Art Museum, where the show was due to travel on loan, questioned the provenance of dozens of its exhibits.

The show was composed of 57 items from the 700-piece collection of Sol Rabin, chair of the Ancient Art Committee at the Harvard Art Museums. The lack of provenance for many of them led to the Denver Museum demanding more evidence of their licit origin before allowing it through their doors, it was reported.

The challenge reportedly led to Bennett being suspended and then fired, although the exact reasons for this were not made public.

"Bennett's supporters note that the artifacts involved in this case are not known to have been looted but some of the Greek pieces drew heightened scrutiny because of the dealers or galleries who had sold them," the Herald stated.

Some came from Robert Hecht, who died in 2012, but Rabin retorted: "There is absolutely no logic that because a dealer is claimed to be a red flag dealer that all things he sold are red flags."

As noted in the British Museum coverage above, Denver Art Museum recently removed many articles from its collection linked to the late disgraced dealer/collector Douglas Latchford and dealer Subash Kapoor, and published an article on September 6, [Provenance Research and Cultural Property Update](#), updating the public on its due diligence policies.

The *New York Times*, which broke the story, noted that other curators had come out to support Bennett, while Bennett himself made some important observations about the application of new standards:

"Bennett said the reality is that for decades ancient objects changed hands without any of the vetting that is now considered routine. As a result, he said, there are many legitimate objects without established ownership histories, but which should not be considered looted.

"The better approach, he suggested, would be to openly exhibit items with gaps in their provenance in ways that foster scholarship but also invite wider scrutiny.

“People often talk about orphaned art,” he said. “I believe they need homes. I believe it’s a good thing we know where they are and what they are for us to understand them better, and then we can have a discussion.”

How Antiques Roadshow became The Antiques Guilt Trip...

Mail Online: September 20: Evidence that the UK’s most celebrated antiques programme is now applying politics to its assessments; in this case, a woman whose grandfather had been a governor of British Somaliland in the 1930s and had had the honour of being presented with a golden robe as a gift by Emperor Haile Selassie himself.

Clearly immensely proud of this treasured possession, the descendant of Sir Harold Kittermaster had brought the robe to the show to share its magnificence with the audience and have it assessed by a specialist.

Although valued at £4,000-5,000, in this case money was clearly not a consideration among the family. They were taken aback, however, when the specialist asked them: “So, if there’s a call for these things to be repatriated, would you be happy to do that?”

This raises several questions: Why should there be a call to return an item that is well recorded as a personal gift of the Emperor – surely that would be an insult to his memory? Why was the subject raised at all when no such calls have been? And is it the role of the *Antiques Roadshow* to involve itself in such debates, particularly when, under the specific circumstances, no controversy exists?

Auctioneer Bob Hayton, commissioned by the *Mail Online* to write the article, added that he had travelled extensively to museums across the globe to inspect their collections, whose wellbeing demands staff and space: “Many minor museums in far-flung countries are filled to overflowing. I saw one that was crammed with furniture and valuables from the days of the Raj.

“Some of those pieces would fetch a fortune at auction, but they were suffering from poor conservation, heat and humidity.

“As I browsed one cabinet, I realised that none of the items was correctly labelled. A curator explained sadly that the cleaners would sweep aside the labels and replace them willy-nilly later.”

Hayton noted other examples of *Roadshow* experts involving themselves in political debates over cultural artefacts and the impact of colonialism.

All of this gives rise to another question: will members of the public continue to queue up in large numbers to present their treasures to experts if they realise that they run the risk of being ambushed on screen in this way? The *Antiques Roadshow* proceeds down this path at its peril.

‘Enough is enough’: US looted treasures unit faces accusations over credit

The Guardian: September 26: News of a spat between academic archaeologist Dr Christos Tsirogiannis and the New York District Attorney's office's Antiquities Unit over who gains credit for seizures and recoveries.

The article begins: “Since 2017, when the Manhattan district attorney’s office announced the formation of its first antiquities trafficking unit, it has recovered nearly 4,500 artefacts stolen from 29 countries, with a combined value of more than \$375m (£307m).”

Who is valuing the items seized remains unclear, although at least some of the valuations seem, inflated.

Dr Tsirogiannis has worked with the unit over the past five years, but as this article makes clear, he is upset that he has not received enough credit for his work and goes as far as accusing the unit of breaching his copyright.

“They are taking my work and presenting it as theirs,” the Guardian reports him as saying. “They are showing off with my academic work and not giving me the credit. It is an abuse of my intellectual property. But now, enough is enough.”

According to the paper, the last straw was the failure of the unit to acknowledge his original research when it used it in its latest case, even though he had made it clear that the research came from his 2012 PhD thesis. “That remains in Cambridge University’s library under restricted access until 2025 because it contains evidence that could help smugglers and prevent the recovery of looted artefacts.”

“This is a very big case, and the research linking it to particular smugglers is from my PhD,” the article quotes him as saying. “I had sent them the whole evidence, word by word, my analysis of the case in order for them to have everything. For five years I’ve been helping them, giving them evidence for free on dozens and dozens of cases. At least give me the credit that I deserve.

“It is utterly shameful. I am speaking out to protect my colleagues, alerting them that their intellectual property will be abused.

This spat raises important questions about Dr Tsirogiannis role and the lack of transparency over stolen art databases, especially the one he exploits to catch out the market rather than assisting it to improve compliance. Specifically, if collectors and the trade are advised that their due diligence should include checking items against the Interpol database to avoid handling looted goods, why is it in the public interest – as opposed to his own private interests – for Dr Tsirogiannis to keep his access to another such database exclusive?

Conversely, if releasing the information he holds would encourage the black market, why does Interpol publish a database of more than 50,000 objects?