The Ethics of Publishing Plunder

for *African Arts*

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Archaeologists have been confronting ethical issues regarding the looting of terracotta art objects from along the Niger River for the past four decades (see McIntosh and McIntosh 1986; McIntosh et al. 1995). Professional archaeologists have worked to reduce illicit looting in a variety of ways including: local public outreach (e.g. MacDonald 1995), 'shaming the collector' (e.g. McIntosh 1996), boycotting or drawing attention to exhibitions containing looted artefacts (e.g. Shaw and MacDonald 1995), blocking importation with legislation (e.g. Shapiro 1995), undertaking salvage excavations at looted sites (e.g. Polet 2005) and making pre-emptive excavations at threatened sites (e.g. Bedaux et al 2001). These efforts have sometimes had a euro-centric bent (despite strong African academic involvement) and have operated divorced from - but parallel to - an active art market that sells these objects. While the link between (predominantly) Western demand for objects and consequent looting of sites has been complexified by the work of anthropologists who pay attention to the agency of the digger/middle men in West Africa (see Panella 2014), the intellectual framing is still one of looter vs. victim and archaeologist vs. collector.

This geographical and economic framing of the debate, echoing the restitution issues stemming from colonial looting, pits rich and powerful 'pull' countries against poorer and less powerful 'victim' countries and results in justifiable unease around the cataloguing and publication of unprovenanced objects. Yet, there is also an alternative view (e.g. Ravenhill 1995): that by the academic boycot of unprovenanced Niger valley art objects, we deny the world important cultural and historical knowledge. The crux of the issue can be summarised as follows: if heritage professionals interpret and publish looted West African art objects do they incite further looting and valorise the results of pillage OR by not addressing such objects do they place forever in the shadows art corpora essential to understanding a range of West African civilisations?

One of us (KCM) as a former student of Roderick and Susan McIntosh and active in Malian archaeology for over thirty years, has conformed to the principle of avoiding any citation or consideration of looted Middle Niger terracottas. I have a treasured offprint of the McIntosh's 1986 *UNESCO Museum* article which contains the fundamental elements of this position:

> We will avoid all specific reference to publications concerned with illicitly obtained activities (footnote 4)

> Publishers and editors of art journals in which these articles are published also share complicity. (pg. 50)

> Art exposed without recording the archaeological provenance is art divorced from the economic, social, ideological and historical context without which ancient art remains inexplicable. (pg.51)

In other words, to publish plundered terracottas tacitly supports the economic cycle of looting, and objects robbed of their archaeological context have little interpretive value anyway. But is the latter really the case?

Ignoring the difficult?

Before examining the ethics of publishing photographs of unprovenanced objects, it is important to identify the image's potential agency in different spheres and the different ethical considerations in each case.

First, an image of an unprovenanced object can be presented as an illustration of text, as a fleshed-out likeness to an object described in the literature. Depending on where it is published, it can confer economic value to the object (or one that can pass for it). The image presents an opportunity for art historians, collectors and museum curators, now and in the future, to navigate objects in their possession in relation to a wider corpus.

Second, an image is a driver of desire for collectors (private and institutional). The carefully lit image creates a very focussed and particular demand for that thing, without which the collection is lacking.

Third, the image can be used for scientific research. The archaeologist or art historian can use it to enhance their knowledge of a corpus of objects from a particular time or place. The image can also help shed light on what is known about trade routes, empires, gender roles, conditions of life, material culture, disease patterns and so on of past cultures.

This third use is what is at stake when thinking through the ethics facing archaeologists in relation to unprovenanced objects.

There is a substantial corpus of art historical work on the Jenne terracotta corpus which has been effectively ignored by the academic archaeological literature – particularly that by Bernard de Grunne (1980, 2014) a Yale-trained trained scholar active in the art trade, and even recent work led by a major museum curator (Bouttiaux and Ghysels 2015). It is as if there are two parallel universes both denying the existence of the other. In the words of the late Philip Ravenhill (curator of the US National Museum of African Art) "[can we] afford to ignore the data that still adheres to these objects? They embody evidence of African History that needs to be dealt with" (1995: 56).

Purification?

The reality of the current situation is that there is not really a pure divide between scholars/archaeologists who avoid all unprovenanced objects and the art historian/collectors who embrace them. As can be seen at the current MET 'SAHEL' exhibition (Lagamma 2020), the people involved in lending the objects, writing the catalogue, curating the exhibition and the potential visitors to the exhibition all belong to overlapping categories of archaeologists, collectors, art historians, interested public and museum professionals. Some of them move from one sphere to another, some of them happily co-exist in multiple spheres.

Despite the efforts of archaeologists to create an ethical divide, in practice this has never really happened because all the agents involved share the same essential impulse: a desire to know/possess the African past. The image of an unprovenanced object published in journals such as *African Arts* is just one link in a long chain of events that link people (with their multiple motives) to looting. A refusal to publish an image notionally weakens the demand for unprovenanced objects, but in reality, this does not stop such objects from ultimately migrating to auction catalogues. Even if archaeology ignores unprovenanced objects, it still provides the historical contexts which make them interesting.

Indeed, this strange and uneasy cohabitation is starkly visible in the catalogue of the MET's current *Sahel* exhibition: the catalogue includes twenty looted archaeological objects from private collections and museums. Yet, key figures (including Roderick McIntosh and African heritage professionals) long-opposed to such valorisations, provide the essential framing texts for the exhibition – while not commenting on the unprovenanced objects. How can this be effectual as a means of discouraging the acquisition of such cultural materials?

In her introduction to the volume, Lagamma (2020) rehearses the issues without really providing a satisfactory conclusion. The get-out clause is that all featured looted items had documented

'provenance' before the US-Mali 1993 bilateral agreement on antiquities trafficking (tacitly placing the UNESCO 1970 agreement to one side). While admitting that this looting has "severely compromised their interpretive potential," it is asserted that the Niger River terracotta corpora provide "a major creative watershed that cannot be overlooked" (Lagamma 2020: 28),

Yet at present, academic ethical codes, institutional and otherwise, are largely set against any analytical engagement with such *archaeologically* unprovenanced materials. Surely the time has come to re-confront this impasse, this elephant in the museum? Ethically, should archaeologists cohabit in publications and/or engage interpretively with images of looted West African art? Under what conditions? Moreover, who is to decide if such an engagement is ethical?

We must acknowledge that the images published in *African Arts,* museum guides and auction catalogues inevitably create a desire for the possession of objects. There has long been an extractive economy of West African material culture for Western consumption (and intellectual deliberation) going back to the 19th century and beyond. This long-term process has been trenchantly commented upon by the President of Mali, Alpha Oumar Konare (1995:27), hoping that "the cultural wealth of Africa, scattered across the world, as are her sons, will begin to return." The same debate has appeared in the recent call for the return of African art from Western Museums to their countries of origin buttressed by the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report. The most interesting part of the repatriation debate in relation to the publication of images of unprovenanced objects is a simultaneous demand for a return to self-determination, for the right to possess and tell the story of your own past. To truly embrace this policy would not only necessitate the return of objects that are central to the identity of nations or cultural groups, but also signal an openness to relinquishing control over who has the right to set future interpretive research agendas.

In this light, would it not be preferable that the future interpretive status of looted objects be adjudicated and guided by African heritage professionals rather than foreign universities and museums? Is the weighing in the balance of heritage elucidation versus protection really intractable or has it been made so by a fixed, one-size-fits-all ethical stance?

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