

The campaign against the antiquities trade

Bennet Bronson



The subject of this article is the so-called "antiquities trade"—the commerce in stolen, smuggled, and sometimes even "legally acquired" archaeological objects (statues, bronzes, jewelry, and the like) which are taken from sites abroad, usually in one of the underdeveloped nations, and sold to collectors and museums in Europe and the United States. Field Museum has recently announced an important policy statement on the antiquities trade. Hence this seems a good time to explain to the Museum's Members what that statement is about and why the Museum feels it is necessary to have an antiquities trade policy.

The easiest way to introduce the subject is to begin with a personal experience, not because my own experiences are so unusual (in fact, most archaeologists have had similar experiences in the last few years), but because it may help explain this article's rather personal and nonobjective tone. I am, I admit, prejudiced. The things which the antiquities traders do are liable to arouse strong feelings.

The story starts in 1966, when I as a beginning graduate student was working on my first real excavation at the great Maya site of Tikal, located in the almost uninhabited rain forest area called El Peten in northern Guatemala. The year before, a wandering chicle-gatherer had come into camp to report the discovery of a new site with *esculturas*—statues—at a place named Jimbal, about twenty miles to the north of Tikal itself. Although such reports often turn out to be false alarms, they cannot be ignored. So a staff member set out to make the long hike (there are no roads in that part of the Peten) out to the place of discovery. He came back two days later with the exciting news that this time the alarm had not been false: Jimbal was an almost perfect Late Classic Period site with several well preserved temples and two limestone stelae—large tombstone-shaped monuments—decorated with relief sculptures in an unusual late style.

Moreover, one of the stelae was not only sculptured but also dated: alongside the sculptured part of the design was a date engraved in the Maya hieroglyphic script. Such dated monuments are rare and of great importance, especially when they

fall into the end of the Late Classic, just before the mysterious disappearance of Classic Maya civilization. The discovery would obviously have to be examined more closely, photographed, and a mold made.

This is where I became involved with the Jimbal dated stela. A mini-expedition was formed, consisting of four persons—one of our jungle-wise workmen to act as guide, two relatively experienced archaeologists, and I, who as the junior member of the team was deputized to carry the latex or liquid rubber with which the mold of the stela would be cast. So we set out, carrying food, machetes, hammocks, and latex—five heavy gallons' worth. We walked a very long distance along narrow, dripping jungle trails, got lost a few times, and at last arrived at this lovely place, a compact temple site overgrown with vines and splendid trees, laid out with typically Maya dramatic flair, untouched for twelve hundred years since the region's mysterious abandonment. In the main plaza the stela stood. We handled it gently. To have even moved it, much less to have attempted to take it away from Jimbal, would have seemed a desecration.

We managed to get a mold of it in the end, after waiting almost two days for the latex to dry in the humid forest air. Then we left, hiked back, made our report, and—after our blisters subsided—resumed our regular work. Six months later I returned from Tikal to the United States and gradually forgot about both Jimbal and its stela as I became involved with other archaeological problems in other places.

I did not think of it again until a short time ago when Dr. Donald Collier, one of my fellow curators, showed me an article in *Science* magazine by Clemency Coggins, an art historian from Harvard specializing in pre-Columbian America. She describes the enormous amount of damage being done at Mexican and Guatemalan sites by the agents of American antiquities dealers and illustrates her statements with a series of pictures of defaced monuments, some just chopped up with chain saws for easy transportation, and some, through the agents' carelessness, completely ruined.

One of the ruined ones, its top half splintered and left lying on the forest floor, was the stela at Jimbal—the same one I had carried five gallons of latex on my back twenty miles for. Turned to limestone dust because of the clumsiness of some art

dealer's agent and because of the greed of his employer and that employer's respectable, greedy customers. All of them probably talking about the sacredness of art and the service they render to mankind by preserving it in their collections for posterity. And all of them probably calculating what their investment would be worth in five and ten years' time. The whole thing is outrageous. It must be stopped.

Admittedly, this is only one case—my own personal reason for being outraged. But there are a lot of cases and a lot of reasons, enough to outrage almost anyone.

Item: Archaeological art has recently been skyrocketing in value. Various causes, chiefly the publicity given by galleries and museums and the market manipulations of speculators, have pushed the price of ancient artifacts up to an absurdly high level. This has happened in spite of the facts that (a) a great many of the articles now on the market are fakes; that (b) nobody—not the art historians nor the archaeologists, and certainly not the innocent collectors—can tell good fakes from the real things; and that (c) a large majority of the articles which are genuine are smuggled or stolen.

Item: A number of entire ancient cultures—the ones whose artifacts fetch really high prices—are at the moment in the process of being systematically and ruthlessly obliterated. The Maya area is perhaps the most hard hit, but almost equally savage destruction is also taking place in the non-Maya parts of Mexico and Guatemala, as well as in Turkey, Iran, India, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Costa Rica, Colombia, Peru, Honduras, and—interestingly—the United States. Since some of these countries, including the United States, do not have effective laws to protect their ancient monuments, part of the destruction is entirely legal. But, whether legal or not, it is an international disgrace.

Item: The persons and institutions performing, directing, and bankrolling the antiquities trade are not obscure figures from the underworld. They are in fact quite respectable. They include a number of the most prominent art dealers in the United States and Europe, many art collectors, and some of the world's leading museums. At a rough estimate, around half of the major American museums with antiquities in their collections have in the last ten years

Jimbal Stela 1, on which thieves used saws and stone chisels to try to remove the carving. Photo by Joya Hairs, Operacion Rescate, Guatemala.

Naranjo Stela 30, as photographed by Teobert Maler in 1905; *left*, west side; *right*, east side. Photos courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

acquired at least one important illicit archaeological object. Some may have been fooled and thought that these objects were legitimate. Many of the museums in question, however, have the reputation of being difficult to fool.

Item: A large percentage of the illicit trade is, in fact, carried out quite openly. Its supporters even defend it, claiming that such-and-such an object was too important and beautiful to be left in the care of the people of the country it was stolen from. To the citizens of that country, this argument may seem a little false in the mouths of people who regularly tear down their own monuments to build parking lots, but the dealers and collectors (and curators) who talk this way are apparently quite sincere. And even if they are frankly in the business to make money, there is not much reason to be secretive; prosecutions for fencing and receiving stolen antiquities are few and far between.

Just a few years ago the two most beautiful stelae from the famous Maya site of Piedras Negras turned up on the U.S. art market, having been cut up with chain saws by a group of alligator hunters working for an important American dealer. The fact that these particular stelae were well known, having been often illustrated in books and visited by tourists, seems not to have affected their salability. They soon found their way to two large East Coast institutions, which put them into temporary storage as a concession to the sensibilities of the Guatemalan government, the stelae's legal owner. No real effort was made to keep the secret, however. The news leaked out and the officials of the two institutions reportedly were surprised when the Guatemalans became upset and demanded that the stelae be returned. At last, after seven years, one of the institutions has agreed to give its stela back. But it lost nothing else. No names were ever publicly mentioned, and the possibility of prosecution was not even considered.

Item: The American public is suffering from the antiquities trade in a number of ways. Our own heritage is being destroyed by the pothunters with almost as much zeal as is the heritage of foreign countries. Given the laxity (or nonexistence) of American antiquities laws, the only check on the pothunters' activities is the comparatively low market value of most American archaeological material. The public's pocketbook suffers whenever another stolen object is bought by a collector and given, as a tax-deductible gift,



to a museum. The idea of the tax-deductible gift is itself an admirable one and is usually an excellent bargain for the public. But when the objects being given are stolen and likely to be later confiscated, the public can lose heavily.

And finally, that segment of the public who collect antiquities themselves—and it is surprisingly large—is very vulnerable to fraud. The situation is ready-made for con men, who are traditionally fond of customers who like the idea of making big profits on things that are slightly illegal. Much of what is sold is stolen and, now that the legal situation is beginning to tighten up, may later be confiscated from the buyer. Also, a large part of the legally acquired portion of the average dealer's stock is fake. Some famous types of artifacts are almost all fakes, but so good that even the professionals—the art historians and the archaeologists—are often fooled, although they usually will not admit this in public. The fakes are even sold as stolen originals. For instance, right now the American market is being flooded with a group of excellent faked Cambodian statues which some dealers tell their customers confidentially were taken right from Angkor Wat by loyalist or communist soldiers. This is not to say that Cambodian sites are not being extensively looted or that some of

this loot may not turn up on the U.S. market. My point is that the average collector—even the average collector without scruples and with an expert advisor—has no way of knowing. In a market as profitable and unethical as the present one he doesn't stand a chance.

Item: As Clemency Coggins reported in her *Science* article, the antiquities entrepreneurs are becoming ruthless not only with sites and monuments but with human lives. In Guatemala alone at least one government official and a number of Lacandon Indians have been murdered by these entrepreneurs' agents. Scattered reports are coming in from other places telling of the intimidation and beating of local policemen, over-diligent customs agents, and site watchmen. The stakes involved have become huge as the market price of antiquities continues to escalate. The speculators on that market can always close their eyes if their wares come into the shop slightly stained with blood.

It is things like these, then, that have convinced us that the time has come to do something about the situation. Part of what we propose to do is contained in Field Museum's policy statement. However, we feel that still more should be done. In the next year or so a number of other

Naranjo Stela 30 in 1971, west side and east side. Photos by Joya Hairs.



museums will probably issue resolutions on the antiquities trade, following the lead of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Harvard University Museums, which were the first to do so. The majority of these resolutions, it seems likely, will be directed specifically toward the illegal aspect of the antiquities business—now that the thieves and smugglers are starting to receive publicity, neither the honest museum officials nor the persons who have in the past knowingly bought stolen goods want to risk being criticized and perhaps prosecuted. This awakening desire to keep skirts clean is important and will hurt badly the racketeers who specialize in out-and-out lawbreaking. But it is only a first step.

The real masters of the antiquities trade, after all, have for long been accustomed to operating in a gray area, neither quite within nor entirely outside the law. Their agents do not sneak into sites with chain saws; they go in openly with bulldozers and papers signed by local officials. They do not smuggle their finds out in fishing boats; they send them, covered with customs seals and official permits, by ordinary air freight. And if it looks as though they will have trouble with American customs, they park their goods in a third country for a while until they can arrange to have

documents made certifying that those particular objects have been in private collections in that third country for fifty years. Museum resolutions aimed entirely at the illicit trade will have little effect on entrepreneurs like these.

Field Museum's policy statement was designed to cover the gray-area as well as the clearly illicit trade. We will not, in the words of the statement, "acquire any archaeological or ethnographic object that cannot be shown to the satisfaction of the Museum official or committee responsible for its acquisition to have been exported legally from its country of origin," and we will not "acquire objects in any case where the responsible Museum official or committee has reasonable cause to believe that the circumstances of their recovery involved the recent unscientific or intentional destruction of sites or monuments." What this means, essentially, is that we do not want *any* archaeological or ethnographic objects found in the recent past or in the future which were acquired by looting or destruction of sites or monuments. We doubt that anything can be done about the spilt milk of the past, but we will be especially cautious about objects recovered within the last several years. Some objects looted as far back as 1960 are probably still in the

pipeline or in the hands of the dealers who originally commissioned the looting, and profits from selling those objects would undoubtedly be ploughed back into further looting.

This also is still not enough, and will not be enough even if, as we hope, other museums join us in resolving against the gray-area trade. Several other things must be done. The federal and state governments must be urged to pass workable laws against the importation of illicit antiquities and against the looting of sites within our own country. The fact that any landowner in almost any state can loot to his heart's content, just as long as he is on his own land, is a national disgrace—America has weaker and more toothless antiquities laws than do most countries in Africa. And more important, the public must be awakened to what is happening. Up till now the operations of the antiquities business have been shrouded from public view, carried on within a small and slightly secretive circle of dealers, collectors, professors, and curators who have cut themselves off from the world at large as much by the obscurity of their language as by the necessity of protecting their enormously valuable collections. Before the antiquities trade can be properly controlled and cut down to size, all this must be opened up. Facts must be collected—no one at present has the slightest idea of the volume or profits of trade in archaeological antiquities. The public must be informed of these facts—what kinds of damage are being done; what things are being stolen; and what the consequences are of their innocent desire for bargains, their innocent pleasure in breaking petty foreign regulations, and their innocent fondness for using statues of ancient gods as living room decorations. And eventually, names must be named. All the talk in the world about unscrupulous dealers and rapacious collectors will have no real meaning until we can begin saying, in detail, what and where and who.

Field Museum's policy statement, printed in this issue of the *Bulletin*, is therefore only a modest beginning. More needs to be done. We want to cooperate with other institutions, and we seek the support of private persons, especially the Members of this Museum. The problem is urgent.

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