

The Archaeology of Archaeology: Ethics, Pedagogy, and the Utility of Decontextualized Antiquities

The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property increased awareness concerning issues of provenance and provenience. This controversy continues to be a concern due to the high-profile requests for the repatriation of artefacts such as the Euphronios Krater and Nefertiti bust, and the recent signatories from major nations involved in trading and importing antiquities, such as the United States (Tubb 2008). This paper explores the utility, ethical implications, and pedagogical potential of decontextualized antiquities through a case study of the Brock University Cypriote Collection in Canada.

Because of the mass, systematic removal of antiquities from Cyprus by Luigi Palma di Cesnola in the late 19th century, this ethical debate is especially pertinent for Cypriote collections. Despite Cesnola's claims to "archaeological research," he removed these objects without systematically documenting their removal (Hadjisavvas 2001). As a result, Cypriote archaeologists frequently struggle to interpret collections of antiquities without proper pedigree, and Cypriote antiquities are often viewed as art without social context by professionals in small and large museums. Since archaeologists not only "collect data" but also "collect context" (Chase, Chase and Topsey 2006), they are limited in the number and complexity of questions they can ask and attempt to answer regarding unprovenanced and unprovenanced artefacts. How can we use unprovenanced materials to maximize their potential? What advantages are there for using them to teach artefact drawing, museum display design, and typology? Can they be used as a pedagogical medium for understanding the importance of ethical practices in the trade of antiquities? What are the benefits for the ownership of decontextualized artefacts in small and large museums, and educational institutions? Does the country of Cyprus benefit too? What are

the ethical implications surrounding the display, publication, and promotion of unprovenanced antiquities?

Professionals need to move away from traditional approaches to unprovenanced materials. By moving in a new direction, these approaches can be coupled with a broad range of topics specifically tailored to each body of artefacts. In terms of museums, this can be achieved with the addition of historical, technical, and conceptual data, as I will demonstrate with my exhibit of the Brock University Cypriote Collection. Consequently, the audience takes away a richer experience and a greater breadth of knowledge, and the countless number of antiquities without context are better utilized.

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