

An Advantageous Proposition

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In my own research, I focus on the institutional history of collecting and I look at the extent of state involvement in the formation of museums. Every piece tells a different story, and I believe that it is important to understand that story. For too long the museum-going public has been present by a pre-prescribed institutional narrative which makes it impossible to develop an informed reading of objects or collections. It is, therefore, important to reassess those early documentation practices which have for so long informed our understanding of the objects in our museums. To understand why, I am going to show an early example of state involvement in the collection of Egyptian antiquities for the British Museum.

In 1820 Henry Salt, the British consul general at Alexandria, offered to sell to the British Museum a number of pieces that he had excavated in Egypt. Salt had been appointed Levant Company consul in 1815, and had received semi-official requests from Sir Joseph Banks and the Society of Antiquarians to excavate on behalf of the British Museum. In Egypt, he had teamed up with Giovanni Belzoni and procured significant pieces. However, when he had offered the pieces for sale to the British Museum, they were deemed too expensive. Many were subsequently sold to the Louvre with a significant number forming the basis for the

establishment of the Egyptian museum in Turin. Banks had believed that he would be able to convince the Government to accept Salt's antiquities and meet the required price, but this had not been the case. The Treasury refused to provide the money for the acquisitions, and the Trustees had been unable to sway the government. The extent of this lost opportunity was only understood once Salt's collection had been sold to the French; it was at that point that the Trustees understood that they would have to educate the Government if they were to influence the future of the Museum. Notwithstanding the example of the French in fact, it was too early to appreciate the potential of the diplomatic service as an agency for the search of antiquities.

Salt made a second offer centred around the sarcophagus of Seti, a particularly beautiful and unique alabaster piece that Belzoni had specifically intended for the British Museum. However agreement could not be reached even on the price of this most remarkable object. Despite the museum having offered the same sum some time before, on Belzoni's death, and contrary to his wishes, Henry Salt sold the sarcophagus to the architect and collector John Soane.

This episode became particularly relevant a few years later, when, on the 11th of July 1835 a letter landed on the desk of Edward Hawkins, who was then Director of the Department of Antiquities at the British Museum. It was from Giovanni D'Athnasi who had worked in Egypt with Belzoni and as an agent for Salt. D'Athnasi

was aware of the potential of new excavations as well as of the painful lack of a respectable collection of Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum. He made Hawkins a very advantageous proposition:

I should feel competent if it be here desired, to undertake an engagement to supply the British Museum with the most beautiful specimen of Egyptian Antiquities, so as in five years to put it in condition to rival the Museum at Paris; on condition that I should each of these years be supplied with the sum of Fifteen Hundred Pounds Sterling, and also with letters of recommendation to the Consul General of Great Britain in Egypt, in order to procure the aid and protection from the local Government which does not permit all who come to make researches ...

To proceed in the discovery of Antiquities I should cause the expenses to be cast up, and I would never extend the researches above a wider space, if I have not in my hands twice or three times the sum of a month's expenses; It was on this plan that I always acted in my excavations in the time of Mr Salt and Mr Barker, at which time we were fortunate in the discovery of the two Sphinxes since sold for so low a sum to Russia. At the end of each year I should review all that had been collected. It is well known that in making these researches double and triple specimens of the same sort are found, which would be superfluous for one Museum, and which might be

advantageously sold by Auction, if they were not wanted to supply any other Gallery in the kingdom. Out of this surplus might be paid not only half of the amount of the five years outlay, but also the salaries of those employed ... If before coming to any determination on the matter, it were desired to make any references respecting myself and my qualifications, I would adduce the correspondence I had with Mr Salt and which will show the zeal and activity displayed in all my proceedings. I would redouble my exertions and my zeal if I were to be appointed to this enterprise, for it would then be my object to obtain a certain renown and perhaps honourable distinction ... I hope that the Noblemen and Gentlemen, Trustees of the British Museum, will after taking my proposition into consideration, consider it a fair one, and likely to be highly advantageous to the country, and that such an opportunity is not likely to occur again...I have decided upon making the proposal after having been a long time urged to it by many English Travellers who had regretted to see their National Museum in need of many fine articles which went to furnish the Galleries of other Countries.¹

Still acutely aware of the previous refusals by the Government, Hawkins decided that he needed to intervene and lobby the

¹ Proposition of Giovanni D'Athanasio to the Trustees of the British Museum, 11 July 1835, Middle East Department, M.E., Letter Book n. 2, old series, 1826-60, fol. 118.

trustees from within. Thus on the 18th of August he wrote to each of them:

Sir,

Signor D'Athanasi who was employed for several years both by the late Mr Salt and by Mr Barker in making excavations in Egypt for the discovery of Antiquities, is about to offer his services to the British Government for the same purpose. Several Gentlemen who are interested in Egyptian Archaeology are very desirous that the proposition should be entertained, and all those who have been in Egypt and have been consulted upon the subject, are satisfied that such a plan is practicable, and would probably be successful.

As the Government of this Country has never, I believe, engaged in undertakings of this nature, it [is] not unlikely that the offer of Athanasi might be declined if left to its own unsupported advocacy. It seems therefore desirable that the undertaking should be pressed upon the attention and consideration of the Lords of the Treasury by other competent judges of its importance and that their Lordships should be aided and fortified in any favourable decisions to which they may be inclined to come, by the expressed opinions of those persons who are best acquainted with the value of Egyptian Antiquities, and have had most experience of the method of acquiring them.

I shall therefore be much obliged by your favouring me with your sentiments in regard of the following points. How far it is reasonable to expect, that excavations will produce Objects commensurate in value with the probable expense? Is Athanasi competent to the undertakings he proposes? Is he trustworthy? What is the more effectual mode of securing a proper expenditure of the money and of the certain transfer to England of all the objects discovered? If there are any other points to which you think the attention of the Government should be directed, I will thank you to state them.²

It is worth bearing in mind that in writing to the Trustees of the museum, Hawkins was contacting representatives of all branches of the government and the establishment. The trustees wrote back, each with their own opinion and considerations on the matter, and every one in principle in favour of appointing and paying D'Athanasi to excavate. John Madox even called for the direct involvement of a consul to look after and administer the money, and lamented the treatment that had been reserved to Salt:

....To secure a proper expenditure of the money, as well as the certain transfer to England of all the objects discovered, would not be an easy matter unless the Agent's character for integrity were unquestionable.....Perhaps his engagement might be

² Hawkins , Circular, 18 Aug. 1835, M.E., Letter book n. 1, new series, fol. 68.

from year to year....and he might have authority to draw upon the Consul at Cairo for money at regular intervals, and in such proportion as that functionary should settle..... The permission of Mohammed Ali must be obtained for the contemplated researches and it is a great moment that our Consul should be on good terms with His Highness, otherwise the attempt is futile..... I cannot but lament the lateness of the day at which this Country turns its attention to Egypt, and that it is only now, when so much has been excavated and so many valuable relics sent to all parts of the World, that we are about to begin. From 1816 to 1820 was the harvest time of discovery and Mr. Salt neglected when he should have been assisted, had the sole honour of forming what might and ought have been a British Collection of Egyptian Antiquities, but the narrow heartlessness of, I suppose, a mistaken economy drove his matchless Museum to the Capital of our Rivals.³

Hawkins' approach proved successful and, as I explain in my book, for the first time the Government agreed to pay an agent to excavate and ship back antiquities on behalf of the British Museum. The content of the letters from the Trustees is unequivocal and this engagement was not just an isolated Museum enterprise, nor the initiative of a single passionate traveller or diplomat. It was a specific offer discussed by a government and

³ Madox to Hawkins, 28 Aug. 1835, M.E., Letter book n. 1, new series, fols 63 and 75 (copy).

agreed with the specific aim of enriching the Egyptian collection of the national museum.

A second letter from D'Athanasi dispels any doubts about the nature of this arrangement:

Sir,

Having had some conversation with you on the subject of bringing to this country the Statue of Sesostris at Memphis,...I have not the least hesitation in being able to remove the statue, and therefore beg to make the two following proposals:

1 I will undertake to convey the statue to the seaside at Alexandria for the sum of £1000, eight hundred of which I shall require for my necessary expenses, and £200 as a remuneration for my services. In this case, I should cut the statue into three equal portions, which might be done without risk, and when the portions arrived at Alexandria, there would be no difficulty in the Government ordering one of the vessels in the Mediterranean to take them on board, the expense of which would not be great, and as it would not be necessary to have a large vessel, it might come up to the London Docks.

2 In the event of it being deemed not desirable to cut the statue, I would undertake to convey it to Alexandria for the sum of £1500 exclusive of the £200 of my services. In this case, I should be obliged to build a large boat to

convey it down the Nile. I will further observe that if the Honorable Trustees are of the opinion that it would cost an enormous sum to obtain it entire, I will undertake to remove it from the place in which it now stands and deliver it in the courtyard of the British Museum for the sum of £5000. ⁴

The unequivocal involvement of the government was required in this case to examine the offer, decide the level of expense, release the money, and provide people on the ground to facilitate the arrival of antiquities to the British Museum. A number of governmental agencies became active collaborators in this enterprise: the British consul in Egypt, the navy, and, in later years the Customs House. This collaboration cannot be discarded as casual. From the moment the government accepted committing money in the procurement of antiquities it effectively stopped being simply the grateful receiver of gifts, as the prescribed institutional narrative would have us believe, and became a proactive agency in support of its national museum. In my book I explain how subsequently the consular service was used with ever-increasing success for the procurement of antiquities. This process became well established and organised when Charles Thomas Newton, the former British Museum employee and future Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities, arrived as British vice consul in the Aegean in 1853. He was a fundamental driver in institutionalising the process of collecting antiquities for the British Museum.

⁴ D'Athanasio to Hawkins, Letter Book n.2 Old Series, 29 June 1837 , folio 126.

In recent years, faced with increasing requests for the return of a number of particularly relevant pieces, the government has avoided engagement in discussions on the issue or restitution. At the same time, unprecedented levels of looting and destruction of cultural heritage, as well as the attitude of certain art museums to the purchase of unprovenanced pieces, have made this discussion a very contemporary issue. Two different fronts have developed.

On one side the archaeologists have made it very clear that the context of objects and excavations matters and that people and nation states have the right to use their cultural heritage as representative of their own culture. In the foreword to *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and the Antiquities Trade*, Paul Shackel tells us that “Most people understand the value of archaeological objects but they are often unaware of the fact that without context, the objects lack the critical correlates that would aid in understanding the social past. This lack of understanding of context is often reinforced by art museums when they display artefacts as art objects”.⁵

On the other side, museum directors, with Cuno as the most vocal representative, advocate the right of museums to possess the pieces, and the right of all humanity to a shared past. Indeed, since his first controversial publication on the position of museums in the modern world, Cuno has successfully managed to shift the

⁵ Brodie, N., Kersel Morag M., Luke, C., and Walter Tubb, K. , *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and the Antiquities Trade*, (Florida University Press, 2006), p. IX.

debate on the ethical side of our own history of collecting to a whole new ground. Against the background of ever-increasing claims for restitution of heritage pieces, he has become a very vocal advocate of the right of westernised countries to hold encyclopaedic museums, believing in the “promotion of a greater understanding and appreciation of similarities between cultures, indeed [in] the fundamental truth that cultures have always been in contact with one another... and that more is to be gained from seeing representative examples of diverse cultures together under “one roof” than to segregate them within modern national borders.”⁶

Stating that we benefit more by the exchange of cultures and the understanding and interaction that this offers us all he points out that:

“Nationalist retentionist cultural property laws serve the interests of one particular modern nation at the expense of the rest of the world. Antiquities are ancient artefacts of times and cultures long preceding the history of the modern nation-state. And in all but a very few cases, they have no obvious relation to that state other than the accident of geography: they happen to have been found within its modern borders.”⁷

⁶ James Cuno, *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. (Acknowledgments, first page) ??

⁷ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), p.146.

He is against the right of modern nation states to reclaim their cultural heritage, or use the antiquities found on their territory at different points in time, as their own. He moreover denies them the right to support and strengthen the claim of their own people.

In discarding modern nation states as a nineteenth century creation, Cuno and the other museum directors that contribute chapters in his books, forget that they are also representatives of nation states and former empires that formed their own national identities using artefacts excavated in other countries and exported under circumstances that have yet to be made known to the public. Not only were such nation states a nineteenth century creation, but many of the museums as we know them today were creations of the same period and were inextricably linked to that very concept of nation state. Surely these museums are therefore just as fictitious a concept as the nation-states that Cuno dismisses?

Plenty of historians have written about the embodiment of the western empires with the cultures of the countries that they conquered. Brian Dolan described how during Napoleon's campaign, 'an imperial discourse developed which was laden with justifications for collecting antiquities which themselves became emblems of the empire.'⁸ Embedded in a new discourse aimed at creating new political values and a new identity, the British saw Napoleon's defeat in Egypt and the consequent acquisition of the

⁸ Dolan, Brian, *Exploring European Frontiers. British Travellers in the Age of Enlightenment*, (Macmillan, 2000), p.149.

antiquities collected there by the French, as ‘an expression of political and civil triumph over radical and corrupt French tyranny’.

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Emmanuele Curti pointed out how, after the acquisition of the Parthenon marbles, large parts of London were redesigned in the neoclassical fashion, with Athenian imaginary becoming a new and stronger symbol of identification for the state and its people.

“England suddenly realizes that they can also defeat Napoleon on an ideological level, employing a different historical perspective to regenerate the original cultural superiority of the Greeks [as themselves] over the Romans [France].”¹⁰ This view was shared by Deborah Challis when she explained how the “cultural inheritance of ancient Greece ...played a role in informing a notion of Britishness in the early nineteenth century”.¹¹

Kathleen Wilson also pointed out that in eighteenth century Britain the discourses of ‘patriotism were complicit with those of imperialism’, and ‘the empire entered the popular and political consciousness as a birthright...embedded in a range of cultural artefacts and pursuits - that- justified British imperial ascendancy as a salvation to the world, and erased, or mystified, the

⁹ Dolan, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Curti, Emmanuele, 'Re-inventing Pheidias: Athens, modern Britain and the politics of culture', Neale Lecture, University College London, Emmanuele Curti 3-4th March 2000.

¹¹ Deborah Challis, “The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British national identity”, *The British Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006):33-39, quotation here is in page 38.

exploitation and bloodshed at home and abroad through which imperial dominance was achieved and perpetuated'.¹²

All these historians share an equal belief, that the 'battles in the ancient lands were conflicts not only over an imperial frontier, but competition over symbolic resources for historical legitimisation of modern -democratic- rule.....The competition for possessing ancient civilisation was not merely about possessing property, but having the historical right to do so.'¹³

The museum became the embodiment of the empire and once they entered it, objects were bent to a new narrative to tell the story that the empire chose to present its people using the heritage of others. In contrast to the cultural conquest of the French, the consensus in Britain has always been that the collections of the British Museum were the result of the efforts, passion and determination of a few remarkable individuals. To an extent this is true, but, as we have seen from the example of Giovanni D'Athansi's proposition, this is not the whole story.

In the Emergence of the Modern Museum, Siegel tells us that it was the collapse of the older political and cultural arrangements that contributed to the emergence of the modern museum in

¹² Wilson, Kathleen, 'The good, the bad, and the impotent. Imperialism and the politics of identity Georgian England', in: Birmingham, A. and Brewer, J., *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800. Image, Object, Text.* (1997), p.255.

¹³ Dolan, *Exploring European Frontiers*, page 131 and 136.

Europe. Explaining the direct link between the ‘the loss of natural context and the emergence of the modern museum’, he tells us how nothing is at home in a museum, where each piece is taken out of context, whilst the possession of fragments from another people’s history indicates ‘the destruction of a political order, and the triumph of a new one’.¹⁴

What if the idea of the current destructions in the Middle East was drawn from parallels with our own past? What if the looting, destruction, reappropriation were nothing more than modern reinterpretations of other people’s examples? We are facing an unprecedented level of destruction in cultural heritage. The art market has entered a new phase: in an era of low return for money, art has become a safe investment. This is having an impact on the prices of art that are spiralling at unprecedented levels and in turn fuelling more request.

From a tool to educate into a safe haven of investors looking for returns, art has never been so sought after. We are experiencing at a shift in perception, where art is becoming once again the victim of the aspiration of omnipotence of would-be governments and a status symbol of the nouveaux riches. New and emerging countries are working to establish their own public museums, whilst the number of both private collectors and private museums opening up to the public is on the rise.

¹⁴ Siegel, Jonah, (ed), *The Emergence of the Modern Museum, An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Sources*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), p.5.

In this context, it matters to talk about the ethics of collecting, and to understand the institutional history of our own collections. The story of the establishment of our own museums is deeply controversial, and based on an entirely Western European point of view. Studying the history of how these museums were put together, reveals that wherever there were political issues to resolve there was the opportunity to collect artistic treasures. Whilst this is a deliberate oversimplification of events, it does synthesise in a couple of concepts the basis of our approach to collecting. Does it matter to understand what happened? How we got our archeological pieces? How our museums were formed? Does it matter to talk about our own attitude to collecting and to the cultures the collections came from? I believe that, unless we come to terms with our own past and acquire transparency about the detail of how collections were formed, we cannot aim to look into the future and resolve the higher debate on the protection of cultural heritage.

In the opening notes to *State Succession in Cultural Property*, Andrzej Jakubowski, quoting Peter Wagner comes up with a statement that is radically different to Cuno's approach and makes us reflect:

“The point about the relationship between -identity- and -heritage- is that they are contingent upon one another: no identity without an act of remembrance of some origin(s) and that, which is remembered as origin(s), is constructed

into the identity's heritage. This makes -history- not into an objective, independent force, but identifies -history- as a narrative. And as all narratives, is a created and therefore chosen one, chosen, that is, by and for particular criteria tied to fundamental decisions about human life...; decisions which are themselves, in turn reflections of their place and time....As a modern endeavour, the question of identity found its answer in the idea of the nation and in the national state as its political, social, economic, and cultural expression.”¹⁵

Jakubowski here tells us that history is a narrative that is linked to both heritage and origins. Can we really separate the individuals from the place they were born and bred, or from the places they grew up in, and the heritage around them that informed their perception of themselves and the world? My own answer became clear on the occasion of the L'Aquila earthquake in April 2009 when my city was struck by a devastating 6.3 magnitude tremor. The city was shut down and 100,000 people were forced to evacuate to other places. It was on the occasion of that violent and abrupt removal that I, and all the other citizens of L'Aquila, realised how much the historic city and its physical heritage were part of us, and how much what I was, was the result of the environment around me.

¹⁵ Peter Wagner 'From Monuments to Human Rights: Redefining "Heritage" in the Work of the Council of Europe', in Jakubowski Andrzej, *State Succession in Cultural Property*, (Oxford University Press 2015), p. 1.

As a consequence of this experience, I find it impossible to accept Cuno's argument about the "accident of geography," because I experienced how much of me was formed by physical elements that, being Italian, fall exactly in the category of those accidents that Cuno explains. I find instead easy to recognise myself in Jakubowski's statement that history is a narrative and the origin is constructed into the identity's heritage.

In a recent conference about art and terrorism, Neville Bolt quoted Margarita Simonyan with a sentence that is still impressed in my mind: "There is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible"¹⁶

Does this mean that everybody chooses to tell their own truth that is relevant to their own situation? That if we muddle the ground enough we can preserve the status quo without questioning our own past? When Cuno talks about the idea of "citizens of the cosmo"¹⁷, he does not specify whether some citizens have more right than others to identify with certain cultural heritage. If we all are citizens of the world, what is it that states the right of one over the other citizen to hold an antiquity? Who decides that some countries have a greater right than others in this sense?

¹⁶ Margarita Simonyan in the editorial: "The Guardian view on Russian propaganda: the truth is out there", 2 March 2015 (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/02/guardian-view-russian-propaganda-truth-out-there>), quoted by Neville Bolt in the paper: Iconic Photographs & Geopolitics, Symposium on Art and Terrorism, Courtauld Institute, London, 27/02/2016.

¹⁷ Cuno, Identity Matters, in : Who Owns Antiquity? (2008) , p.124.

What if we are trapped in the wrong conversation? One that states the right of this or the other people to an heritage, rather than how to work all together to preserve the common heritage for the benefit of all?

Current events impose a duty of care. Faced by the commodification and senseless destruction of art that is common heritage, we have a duty to find a solution and this requires us to be transparent about our own history. Learning about the past, telling the story of our museums and the circumstances of the arrival of their pieces, allowing the public to be informed and make up their own minds, and opening up to discussion will help to do so. Only when we come to terms with our own past, sign the conventions, and prepare to discuss the equal rights of all countries to a shared cultural heritage, can we hope to bring a significant contribution to the fight against the destruction of such cultural heritage.

I have shown with the episode of D'Athanasia proposal to the British Museum that there is more to our museum history than a simplistic gathering of pieces from different cultures. If we want to change the status quo, we need to start to talk about it.