

ART & AUCTION

PREVIEW: The New York Sales A NEW BOUT OF BOOM FEVER

Chris Ofili Explains Himself

Discovering Scandinavia's
Auction Houses

THE INSIDER'S NEWSMAGAZINE



Pablo Picasso's 1938 *Femme assise dans un jardin* at Sotheby's

LETTERS: MELIKIAN AND ANTIQUITIES

To the Editor:

Souren Melikian's article, "Antiquities: A Market Future?" in the July/August 1999 issue of *Art & Auction*, puts forward an unrealistically moralistic view of a market that has lasted over two centuries and has provided museums worldwide with the opportunity to restore and display priceless works of ancient art. Mr. Melikian disappointingly and unfairly ignores the complex web of issues relevant to the antiquities market, such as: the need for a balance between the ethics (translated into law) of "ownership" of cultural treasures and a corresponding duty to conserve and to share those treasures; the numerous current threats to the preservation of antiquities and their excavation sites, and to the scientific worth they carry; and the responsibility to control those threats, tempering strict and efficient legal protections with a commitment to the (continued) visibility and open study of ancient artifacts.

The UNESCO Convention was an attempt to staunch what was seen as an unjustifiable drain of precious cultural artifacts from the countries in which they had been found. As a result of the convention's restrictive measures, newly excavated antiquities are no longer exported, and others have been confiscated from collectors by local governments in the affected nations. Most private collectors, naturally, ceased to collect antiquities, or even art in general, for fear of reprisals. Many private museums in these countries closed their doors permanently. Yet, for several years, officially licensed and authorized antiquities shops were permitted to do business! Illogically, the new legislation allowed for the government-controlled purchase and sale of ancient artworks within, but not beyond, the borders of the lands in which the items were unearthed.

In a tragic irony, a glut of ancient treasures is jealously held captive in each country in which they are plentiful. In such countries, even in the best of circumstances, the state museums often lack protective climate control, and untrained conservators, in the course of their work, inadvertently chemically disfigure the sheen and texture of bronzes and marble as well as far more fragile and equally irreplaceable artifacts. How paradoxical it is that archaeologically rich nations insist upon retaining vastly more works than they can ever display, in effect condemning many of them to this routine mutilation. In a distorted defense of the (undisputed) rights of nations abounding in antiquities, the UNESCO Convention's rules thus set frustratingly insurmountable obstacles before not only archaeologists and anthropologists but also the interested museumgoing public.

The only presently sanctioned source of "new" antiquities consists of official archaeological excavations. While responsibly executed government-authorized digs contribute to our knowledge of ancient cultures, information potentially obtained from even some of the best investigations remains largely unpublished, often going out-of-date before it is made available. Due to a near-total lack of appropriate venues, an insignificant proportion of the ancient artworks discovered in the past half-century has actually been publicly exhibited. Unearthed artworks are handled roughly and stored carelessly; without proper conservation, pieces of inestimable

aesthetic and scientific value are left to slowly deteriorate, unseen and unstudied.

"Commercial digging," as Mr. Melikian refers to it in his article, is far from being the greatest cause either of irreparable damage to archaeological sites or of irretrievable losses to scientific knowledge. The main culprits are shoddily done official excavations, the very low standard of conservation care in state museums and vandalism, whether motivated by religious radicalism, by "semiofficial" (often military) plundering for a lucrative and quite hidden market or by the thoughtless enthusiasm of tourists.

Consider, by way of contrast to the above, the many antiquities that have been rescued from their polluted environments and are today properly housed in Western museums. This was only possible before the UNESCO Convention, when antiquities could be purchased through licensed, authorized dealers and legally removed from their countries of origin. (Antiquities-exporting committees would occasionally block an object deemed too important to be shipped overseas, but most of the submitted antiquities were approved for export.) We must not forget that it has been mainly through the efforts of antiquities collectors and dealers that the greatest museum collections in the Western hemisphere were established.

Countries that boast abundant archaeological finds are understandably proud of and possessive toward the tokens of their cultural heritage. As the pre-UNESCO acceptance of antiquities exporting committees proved, these countries can assert their right to retain their most cherished antiquities. It would be preferable for these nations to enforce domestically their own laws concerning the trade in antiquities than to attempt to prevent or reverse such sales beyond their borders. This approach would be far more effective than the current system that tends to blame foreign collectors for alleged acquisition and compels sellers to verify unilaterally the provenance of each artwork sold, without inquiring about the possible complicity of government officials in the source countries. Archaeologically rich nations should raise the standard of their care of retained antiquities by employing thoroughly trained competent conservation experts. They should also publicize widely their discoveries.

Mr. Melikian's proposal would push the antiquities market further toward a path beset by opportunistic and unscrupulous activities. We should learn from the excesses and deficiencies of the UNESCO Convention. New legislation is required to protect both the antiquities themselves and the interests of the public and the scholarly community. An open market of "antiquities without walls" should be re-created. The best way to honor our cultural heritage is by sharing it, rather than by destroying it. Called for is not the end of the antiquities market but cooperation among governments, antiquities organizations, museums, collectors, dealers, scholars and the public at large.

Lucien Viola
Marrakech, Morocco

Dateline

23 Comment

24 Around the Block

More Questions About Sotheby's Furniture Fakes, Akram Ojeh: From Arms to Art, A New Game of Risk, Wynn Adds Whitney Cézanne to Bellagio, Dealer Adam Williams to Face French Court Over Looted Hals, Letters: Melikian and Antiquities

38 Talk of the Trade

Bringing Vienna Home, A Bit of History in Chelsea, von Lintel and Nusser Partner, Notes

42 Under the Hammer

Phillips Rises Down Under, Finarte Joins IA, Films for Sale, Note

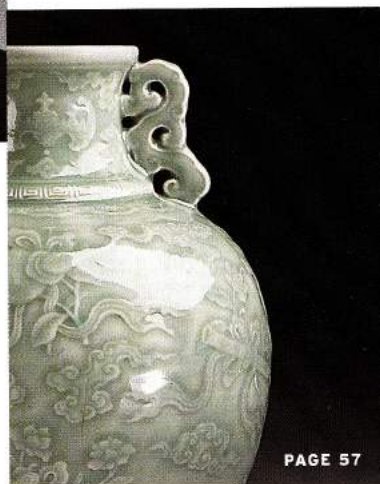
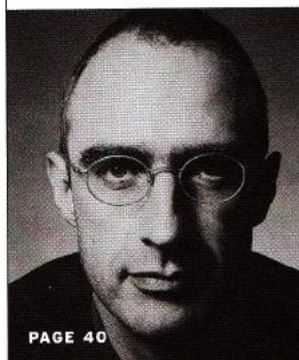
50 Site Specifics

Appraising "The Internet Mess," Microsoft Bids for Auction Presence

53 Marketplace

Prices for Eames Continue to Rise, Today's Entrepreneurs Rediscover Herter Brothers, Buying Is Thin at FIAC

Auction Reviews: Chinese Works of Art, Japanese and Korean Art, Indian and Southeast Asian Art, Asian Works of Art, Nagel's 75th Anniversary Auction, In Brief



Features

70 Muchos Picassos...

...and a raft of other outstanding pictures should make this month's sales a high point of the current art market boom and a grand finale to the millennium. By Judd Tully

78 Northern Highlights

American collectors have been slow to discover the auction houses of Denmark and Sweden. That's too bad, because they offer not only superb Scandinavian works, but also quality pieces from all over the globe. By Cara Greenberg

86 Eye On: Chris Ofili

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

88 The Auction Economy: A Round Table

Leading e-commerce pioneers assess the impact of online auctions. How are they changing the way the world does business? By Jori Finkel

