

## ARTS & BOOKS

### [American museums embroiled in illegal antiquities trade](#)

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**Several major American museums like the MET and the Getty have recently lost their credibility further to illegal trade. This thorny issue is being dealt with in very different ways by institutions on both sides of the Atlantic.**



Euphronios krater  
(bowl for mixing wine and water)  
ca. 515 B.C.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/>

Claims for looted artworks have become more and more frequent. Since the Elgin marbles controversy, museum directors all over the world have been increasing their legal staff in order to defend litigious cases.

On February 20<sup>th</sup> the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Mr de Montebello, signed an agreement with the Italian Culture Minister for the restitution of 21 objects looted from Italian soil. This agreement means Italy will have important national artworks returned; it also gives way to new common initiatives such as excavation and the reception of long-term loans of Italian artefacts. This deal has put an end to a long quarrel. The main claims concern the Euphronios krater, a 2500 year old vase dug up in Cerveteri, not far from Rome. It was bought in 1972 for one million dollars from dealer Robert Hecht, who together with Marion True, former antiquities curator at Paul Getty's Museum in Los Angeles, is currently on trial in Rome for another illicit artwork traffic.

A code of professional ethic entitled "Ethics of Acquisition" was established in 1970 by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In 2004 new guidelines against the acquisition of undocumented antiquities were debated and adopted by European museums. Many then decided to keep recently bought works that were lacking a well-documented history of origin and ownership in their archives.

Last February, the American Association of Art Museum Directors updated its own guidelines and stated that museums must pay attention to the provenance, legal and ethical issues relating to the artworks they buy or they borrow. However, the Association also insisted that incomplete documentation should not necessarily prevent loan and display. The argument is that when on public display these artworks can be kept in good conditions and can contribute to common knowledge.

This openness obviously increases the risk of getting new claims from foreign countries. But it also tends to encourage illicit trade as showing such works in a public institution often makes their price surge, thus stimulating the demand for looted artworks...

Sources: Hugh Eakin and Elisabetta Povoledo "Met's Fears On Looted Antiquities Are Not New," *The New York Times* 20 February 2006.

John Hooper "Italy and US in antiquities deal," *The Guardian* 22 February 2006.

Hugh Eakin "Museums Assert Right On Showing Antiquities," *The New York Times* 25 February 2006.