



The World Archaeological Congress

Please reply to:

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Statement on Museum Acquisition and Loan of Antiquities

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is an international organization which represents professional archaeologists in tertiary institutions, museums, government agencies and the private sector in more than 90 countries. WAC has a particular interest in the protection of sites and objects of the past, and the ownership, protection and conservation of archaeological heritage.

WAC wishes to respond to the new guidelines on incoming loans of archaeological artefacts and ancient artworks articulated by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD). While the new guidelines are intended to support the ethical acquisition of antiquities, they are not comprehensive of archaeological artefacts, and circumstances relating to their provenance.

The guidelines do not go far enough to ensure that acquisitions comply with the legislation of the country of origin and any other countries through which the artefacts may have passed. Clearly, they do not conform to the 2001 International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics. WAC is concerned that the guidelines could actually facilitate museums to make acquisitions that originate from the looting of archaeological sites. For museums to acquire artefacts that are the result of looting disregards the humanitarian imperative to conserve cultural heritage, and to preserve archaeological sites for the benefit of future generations.

‘It is unfortunate that the AAMD appears to be in denial of the international developments currently underway to prevent the looting of antiquities and the consequent destruction of the world’s archaeological heritage,’ says Chair of the WAC Taskforce on Looting, Colin Renfrew (Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn), Emeritus Disney Professor of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. ‘A rolling, ten-year "policy" such as the AAMD now proposes (and which the Metropolitan Museum is said now to follow) is in effect a Looters' Charter, and an invitation to buy stolen property. Whatever happened to due diligence? It would allow an unscrupulous dealer (here we might recall the Schulz conviction and the distinguished list of his former client museums) to buy looted antiquities directly from the looters, store them for ten years and then sell them on to any museums following the AAMD "policy".’

WAC endorses principles to preserve and protect cultural heritage, and to ensure best practice. To publish such a transparently flawed “policy” at this sensitive time in the name of ethics betrays either monumental ignorance or a cynicism of the worst kind,’ states Lord Renfrew. ‘The AAMD is set on a path which will give it a very bad name in the world of international scholarship,’ he added.

Members of WAC are united in their strong opposition to the loss of archaeological heritage through inadequate regulation of procedures. WAC urges AAMD to adopt stringent principles and practices for the acquisition of ancient art and archaeological artefacts in museums.

For further information contact:

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