In a *Time* magazine article posted online at www.time.com on Dec. 12, Maria Baugh describes a recent Sotheby’s auction in which a small Babylonian sculpture—allegedly found at an archaeological site near Baghdad—sold for over $50 million. In contrast to this record-breaking sale, the article, “Antiquities: The Hottest Investment” shares the “good news” about the private purchase of antiquities and offers tips for novices of more modest means interested in investing in their own pieces of Mesopotamian history.

Although several Egyptian amulets may sparkle in your living room showcase for only $10,000 a year, as the article indicates, the commercial sale of antiquities, a term for the cultural artifacts of pre-modern times, is fraught with legal risks for antiquities sellers and individual investors, and detrimental consequences for museums, archaeological sites, and the public knowledge of diverse human histories.

Amateur antiquities buyers may be tempted by art dealers selling “legitimate” Greek pottery or Roman bronze brooches, but a large percentage of antiquities circulating in the international market are obtained illegally through the looting of archaeological sites. Motivated by profit rather than the preservation of cultural knowledge, looters ignore the context of the artifact, destroy surrounding parts of the archaeological site, and ultimately destroy human history. Even those who never put a shovel into dirt are complicit in the destruction of archaeological sites if they participate in the buying and selling of antiquities.

Equally troublesome, the black market trade of antiquities is nestled within illegal trade in narcotics and arms. U.S. citizens pay enormous portions of tax revenues to local police, the FBI, the U.S. Coast Guard, INTERPOL, and other agencies to halt this trade. Buyers should beware, if apprehended with illegally traded antiquities, they potentially face confiscation at best, and charges of conspiracy and smuggling at worst.

“So, what should the novice collector know before jumping in and buying the first Greek vase they find?” the *Time* article asks. The novice collector should know that the nation of Greece has established full legal protection over its archaeological sites and that no ancient objects can be removed legally without permits. The United States is a signatory to international treaties focused on stopping the illicit trade in stolen artifacts. Furthermore, most paper documentation associated with for-sale antiquities (for example, purporting that the object is from “an old family collection” dating before legal protection) is fraudulent.

If the $50 million Babylonian statue sold at Sotheby’s was indeed “found at an archaeological dig near Baghdad” then it was certainly smuggled illegally out of Iraq, even before 1948 when it apparently first appeared on the international market. By glorifying the commercialization of such artifacts, *Time* and the current U.S. buyers and sellers are complicit in the on-going destruction of cultural property from important museums and archaeological sites in Iraq.

 Objects from antiquity have great potential to inform us about the lifestyles, cultures, social arrangements and social change of ancient societies. However, this is only true if
they are recovered and recorded in site context by well-trained researchers. Before buying an ancient Greek vase, Roman bronze brooch, or Maya jade ornament consider the risks and consequences of the purchase and its impact on the public understanding of diverse human histories with tremendous value to peoples and nations in the present.

For readers who are interested in understanding the legal issues in more detail, excellent summaries of international, national and state legislation can be found on the Web at: http://archnet.asu.edu/Topical/CRM/crm.html

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