

A Marble Statue of a Boy at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

τοῦ μὲν δικαίου τὴν δόκησιν ἄρνησο
τὰ δ' ἔργα τοῦ πᾶν δρῶντος· ἔνθα κερδανεῖς

Achieve the just man's good repute,
but deeds that fit the knave; therein shall be your gain

PLUTARCH, *Moralia*, 18e [fragment of an unknown tragedy] (trans. Cole Babbitt)

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Abstract

Since 2006, about 200 antiquities of exceptional quality, depicted in the confiscated Medici, Becchina, and Symes-Michaelides archives, have been identified by the Italian authorities as looted, and have been repatriated from North American museums, private collectors, antiquities dealers, galleries and auction houses (for the latest update of the list see Tsirogiannis 2013). Most of these antiquities have been already published and exhibited, with an acknowledgement of their looted past (e.g. Godart & De Caro 2007; Gill & Chippindale 2007; Godart, De Caro & Gavrilis 2008; ICE 2012; ICE 2013). While details of the acquisitions regarding these looted antiquities were first being published (e.g. Watson & Todeschini 2006 and 2007; Gill & Chippindale 2006, Isman 2009), demonstrating that many of these objects had been sold with fabricated collecting histories (e.g. the famous Euphronios krater at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, now in Rome), new cases started to emerge. This article attempts to trace the true journey of another antiquity, reveals new evidence regarding its collecting history, researches the implications arising and exposes, once again, the way the international illicit antiquities network has been operating in recent years.¹

Keywords: Medici, Becchina, looted antiquities, Symes, Euphronios krater, Virginia Museum of Arts.

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Facts and Evidence

According to the Becchina archive (CD 1, pagina 5, foto 1375), Mario Bruno -who was known as a “receiver of stolen goods” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:86) and “a major grave-robber” (Isman 2008:30) - sold 12 antiquities to Gianfranco Becchina, on 22 August 1987. Among these antiquities was a marble statue of a boy. This is depicted in a cut-in-half Polaroid image, covered with soil, with its head cut and lying on (what appears to be) a white cloth. A bunch of keys and a corkscrew are depicted beside the statue, at the lower left corner of the image, to provide an idea of the statue’s scale. A large “X,” added later with a blue marker to the image, indicates that the statue was sold by Becchina at some point after 22 August 1987. The image is stuck on a notebook page prominently entitled “da Mario 22/8/1987” (“from Mario 22/8/1987”). A handwritten entry, referring to this statue, notes:

Statua marmo con testa forse ritratto di figlio di imperatore. pag. cash 45' CH

“Marble statue with head, perhaps portrait of the son of an Emperor. Paid cash 45 [000?] CH [Swiss Francs].”

At the right side of the image there is a note, in the same blue marker with which the “X” was made: “=V Fried” (but the “V” was written with a thin black pen). The use of the blue marker by Becchina to write “= [V] Fried” suggests that the statue was sold by Becchina a substantial amount of time after it was bought from Bruno (see below). Indeed, all the entries for all 12 antiquities were written with the thin black pen at the time of their acquisition from Bruno; the same blue marker annotates 5 of these objects, indicating that they were sold by Becchina in a later period (there are no further notes on the page regarding a later sale of the remaining 7 antiquities). In the abbreviated code, used by Italian members of the international illicit antiquities network, “V” stands for *venduto*, “sold” (the same code was used by Medici, see Felch & Frammolino 2011:174). Thus, Becchina’s handwritten note means “sold to Frieda.”

Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger was the owner of the antiquities gallery Nefer in Zurich, and maintained strong bonds with Becchina and Symes-Michaelides. Indeed, the same statue of a boy that passed from Bruno to Becchina in August 1987 appeared in the Nefer gallery antiquities catalogue in 1989 (Galerie Nefer Ancient Art 1989:26, no. 28). As the statue was not included even in the 1988 Nefer antiquities catalogue (Galerie Nefer Ancient Art 1988), it was probably sold by Becchina to Tchacos about a year later, a gap also suggested by the change of pen to mark the image now in the Becchina archive. In the 1989 Nefer catalogue, the statue is presented clean of soil and with its head attached to its neck. The statue’s price (in Swiss Francs) was higher

than the highest price mentioned for any other antiquity in the catalogue (no. 38 for 28,000), since it was only available “on request.” The entry notes:

Portrait statue of a young boy. The boy has short hair except for a braid fastened at the back of his head. This hairstyle was considered a good-luck charm for Egyptian youngsters. The boy’s youthful features are well-rendered in a round, full face. His head is turned to the right. His childish body is rendered with great skill under the thick himation. The head was broken off in antiquity and re-assembled. Marble with yellow brown encrustation on the right side. Flavian, 2nd quarter of the 1st century B.C. [sic]. 86 cm (34 in.).

Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger, an Egyptian-born Greek dealer, was involved in several cases of looted antiquities (e.g. Watson & Todeschini 2007:194-195, 227) that have been repatriated to Italy (Gill & Chippindale 2006:312). As part of a deal between Tchacos and the Italian authorities, Frieda Tchacos was given a light sentence: “[...] on September 17, 2002, she was convicted of handling stolen and smuggled goods, and of failing to notify the authorities of the antiquities that came her way. She was given one year and six months’ imprisonment, suspended, and fined 1,000 euros” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:194-195). This led to Tchacos’ full cooperation.

The absence of collection history and find-spot, regarding the statue from the Nefer gallery catalogue, combined with the hairstyle and date information, leave unclear whether the statue arrived in Zurich from Egypt, Greece, Italy or anywhere else within the borders of the Roman Empire. However, it is known that Mario Bruno was “a dealer who operated in Etruria and Puglia, where everybody worked, and he would sell the archaeological material abroad” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:154). Moreover, given the condition of the statue as depicted in the Becchina Polaroid image, it seems more likely that the statue was found in Italy, even if it had been transported there in antiquity.

The same statue of a boy was acquired in 1989 by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, USA and was assigned the accession number 89.24. The museum currently provides information about the statue on its website:

Greek (2nd century BC - 1st century AD)
Statue of a Young Boy
2nd century BC - 1st century AD
Marble
34.125 x 15.75 x 9 in.
87.31 x 40.01 cm.
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

89.24

NOT ON VIEW

An email enquiry (email 29 January 2013) regarding the previous collecting history of the statue, received an email response from the museum (on 1 February 2013 by Mr Bonadies) noting that the statue had been acquired from Frieda Tchacos, but been supplied with a different collecting history:

According to the museum records, we purchased the statue in 1989 from Galerie Nefer and its proprietor Frieda Tchacos. Ms. Tchacos stated that she had purchased the statue from a fellow Swiss dealer who, in turn had bought it from Mr. Alfred Obrecht. Obrecht acquired the statue on September 18, 1977 from Dr. Arthur von Arx, who stated that he acquired it from a Swiss friend on June 13, 1966, who, by 1989, had already died.

On 2 February 2013 I emailed Mr Bonadies asking if the museum had the name of the Swiss dealer who sold the statue to Tchacos, and if the museum has documented evidence that the statue acc. no. 89.24 passed through the Alfred Obrecht and Arthur von Arx collections, or if there is only a written statement by Ms Tchacos regarding these collections. Mr Bonadies replied on 5 February 2013:

As part of our research into the history of the piece prior to its purchase, we contacted both Mr. Arx and Mr. Obrecht and received written assurances from both that the information Ms. Tchacos provided was accurate, viz., that Mr. Obrecht purchased the statue in 1977 and that Mr. Arx purchased it in 1966.

He also informed me (on 6 February 2013) that the museum does “not have any record” regarding the identity of the “fellow Swiss dealer.”

Further Questions and Discussion

Several remarks may be made about this case. First, the Becchina archive demonstrates that the statue was sold to Tchacos by Becchina, the Italian dealer who operated in Switzerland. It is extremely likely that Tchacos’ “fellow Swiss dealer” was Gianfranco Becchina. Second, the Becchina archive demonstrates that the statue was not sold to the previous owner by “Mr. Alfred Obrecht,” but by Mario Bruno.

The name of Alfred Obrecht does appear currently in auctions as an antiquities collector.² The name of Dr Arthur

von Arx has been linked to at least two Cycladic figures in private collections,³ of which one appears to be a North American private collection. Furthermore, Dr Arthur von Arx’s Swiss friend (at least in this particular case) cannot be Mario Bruno, not only because Bruno was Italian (although he operated also in Lugano, see Watson & Todeschini 2007:17), but mainly because Bruno was still alive in 1989 (Isman 2008:30). Mario Bruno died in 1993, having been “a prominent figure in the antiquities underworld in the 1980’s, almost on a level with Hecht” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:290).⁴

Third, it is important to remind ourselves that the first Polaroid camera which produced “self-developing instant color prints”⁵ was the SX-70 model, which was introduced in 1972, long after the creation of the first Italian law that prohibited the export of antiquities without the state’s permission (1939). “By definition, therefore, Polaroid photographs of dirty, unprovenanced antiquities are themselves evidence of a kind that these objects left the ground illegally” (Watson & Todeschini 2007:57). This leads to a simple question: how can the statue of the boy, ostensibly with a collecting history since 1966 (which does not include Becchina and Bruno), appear unclean and broken off from its head in a Polaroid image which dates after 1972, in a Becchina notebook which dates to 1987, in a transaction which includes Mario Bruno? How did such an apparently misleading collecting history become linked to the statue?

There are more questions arising from the information published by the Nefer gallery and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. For example, does the statue date to the period of the Flavian dynasty (69-96 AD, and not “2nd quarter of the 1st century B.C.,” as the Nefer gallery notes wrongly) or does it date “2nd century BC - 1st century AD,” as stated by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts? Was the attribution to the Flavian period by the Nefer gallery based on the results of typological studies? Who was the expert who attributed the statue to the period of the Flavian dynasty for the Nefer gallery? Did the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts disagree with these results and, based on more advanced methods and studies, increase the chronological margin?

Also, where was the statue created? In Egypt, as the Nefer

Collection of Alfred Obrecht, Feldbrunnen, Switzerland (available at <http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/7331366>, last accessed 2/2/2013).

3 Getz-Preziosi 1987:170 (no. 34): “Former collections: Arthur von Arx”; Getz-Gentle 2001:156 (pls. 60-61, no. 3): “Harmon Coll. (ex von Arx Coll.) L 24.4 cm. Find-place unknown [...]” and no. 6: “P Coll (ex von Arx Coll.) [...]”.

4 The notorious dealer Robert Emmanuel Hecht Jr (3/6/1919–8/2/2012), who was involved also in the case of the Metropolitan Museum’s looted Euphronios krater, among numerous other cases.

5 Boston University, available at <http://www.bu.edu/prc/forms/polatime-line.pdf>, last accessed 6/2/2013. The text was written after 2002, but the exact date remains unclear.

2 E.g. Myers Auction Gallery, *European and Asian Auction*, 10/2/2013, lot 47: An Egyptian Wooden Statuette - Old Kingdom [...] PROVENANCE:

gallery implies because of the boy's hairstyle? In Greece, since Virginia Museum of Fine Arts labels it "Greek?" Or was it made anywhere in the Roman Empire, since the Nefer gallery labels it "Flavian," and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts seems to allow such a possibility with the date given ("2nd century BC - 1st century AD?") The marble sources could assist with the identification of the statue's origin. Since the archaeological context of this statue is not known, is there any evidence to support any of the different origins the statue was given from the Nefer gallery and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts? Or, given the evidence included in the Becchina archive, combined with the recorded actions of the dealers whom it asserts traded the statue, is it not more probable that the statue was looted from Italy, smuggled to Switzerland, "laundered" through the Nefer gallery and was supplied to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts with an apparently falsified collecting history? The pattern of looted antiquities from Italy, depicted in the Medici archive and supplied with falsified collecting histories was found in several cases at the Museum of Fine Art in Boston (Gill & Chippindale 2006:314). All these questions remain unanswered, since the statue is not on view in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, nor is there any additional information on the museum's website to clarify any of these questions.

Combining all the published and unpublished information with the newly available evidence from the Becchina archive, it seems that Frieda Tchacos-Nussberger supplied the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond with a collecting history which omitted the involvement of Gianfranco Becchina and Mario Bruno, despite her probable direct contact with Becchina, the apparent source of the statue. Furthermore, the collecting history stated by Tchacos conveniently extends the statue's known history back to 1966, before the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1970 ICOM statement on Ethics of Acquisitions (which led to the "*Code of Professional Ethics*" adopted by the 1986 General Assembly in Buenos Aires). Therefore, if every part of the collecting history asserted by Tchacos was true, and the statue was a licit antiquity, why did Tchacos apparently omit the names of Becchina and Bruno and substitute them with others? Although, technically, the statue may have been lying, unclean and with its head broken, on the floor of the houses of three different collectors between 1966 and 1977, before it was sold to the "fellow Swiss dealer" who sold it to Tchacos (thus, being cleaned, conserved and acquiring a modern base for the first time), Tchacos' story does not account for the involvement of an additional dealer (Becchina or Bruno, even if one of them is considered to be the "fellow Swiss dealer"), as the Becchina archive shows.

We know that Frieda Tchacos was aware of the Becchina-Bruno cooperation, for she referred to it during her interrogation by the Italian prosecutor Paolo Giorgio Ferri (on February 17-18, 2002, see Watson & Todeschini 2007:192):

She [Frieda Tchacos] confirmed that there was "a precise triangle" - Hecht, Becchina, Monticelli - and that the latter mainly supplied "[e]verything that could be found in the south of Italy; I think Apulian [vases], I think terracottas, I think bronzes..." She later amended this cordata to include George Ortiz and Mario Bruno.

There is a further issue. Why and how was an institution such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts involved in the acquisition of a Becchina object, and why did it not verify Frieda Tchacos' claims about the collecting history of the statue, as was the duty of the museum according to the 1970 UNESCO Convention, the 1970 ICOM statement about Ethics of Acquisitions, the 1986 ICOM Code of Professional Ethics and the 1973 Archaeological Institute of America Resolution *on the Acquisition of Antiquities by Museums*? The latter clearly states:

The Archaeological Institute of America believes that Museums can henceforth best implement such cooperation by refusing to acquire through purchase, gift, or bequest cultural property exported subsequent to December 30, 1973, in violation of the laws obtaining in the countries of origin.

We further believe that the governing bodies, directors and curators of Museums should, in determining the propriety of acquiring cultural property, support and be guided by the policies of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Export, Import and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and the implementing provisions adopted by the signatory states.

The answer possibly lies in the following facts about Dr Margaret Ellen Mayo, the Curator of Ancient Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts from 1978 to 2004. On its official website, the museum notes:

In 1978, Dr Margaret Ellen Mayo became VMFA's first curator of Ancient Art. During her 26 years as head of the department, Mayo balanced the earlier Egyptian acquisitions with Greek and Roman art; developed the entire collection around a solid, central core; and originated two exhibitions, "South Italian Vases" and "Cycladic Art in North American Collections," both of which travelled nationally. As it grew to its current stature under Mayo's guidance, the department also benefited greatly from the advice of distinguished colleagues and scholars at

sister institutions. Mayo retired in the fall of 2004.⁶

Prior to working at the museum, Dr Mayo was the director of the Summa Galleries in Beverly Hills, whose president and owner, Bruce McNall, was well-known for his involvement in trafficking antiquities (McNall 2003), although the seventy-month sentence he eventually served was for bank fraud (Bates 2002). Dr Mayo prepared and wrote the first Summa Galleries antiquities catalogue (The Summa Galleries 1976), which included at least one object depicted in the confiscated Medici archive (Tsirogiannis 2013). In 1983, Dr Mayo also wrote the introduction for *Wealth of the Ancient World*, the volume of the Hunt brothers' antiquities collection (Bothmer *et al* 1983:25-35). The same volume includes the looted Euphronios kylix, which the Hunt brothers acquired from Bruce McNall's Summa Galleries, after Hecht purchased it from Giacomo Medici (Silver 2010). Medici has been convicted by the highest court of Italy, for conspiracy and receiving stolen goods (Felch 2012) and his rival, Gianfranco Becchina, was convicted in February 2011 of illicitly dealing in antiquities. Becchina appealed and his case remains in the Italian court system (ICE 2013).

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts should now contact the Italian authorities for the evidence presented in this article regarding the statue in the Becchina archive, under the Association of Art Museum Directors' "Guidelines on the Acquisition of Archaeological Material and Ancient Art," revised in January 2013 (AAMD 2013:7):

If a member museum, as a result of its continuing research, gains information that establishes another party's right to ownership of a Work, the museum should bring this information to the attention of the party, and if the case warrants, initiate the return of the Work to that party, as has been done in the past. In the event that a third party brings to the attention of a member museum information supporting the party's claim to a Work, the museum should respond promptly and responsibly and take whatever steps are necessary to address this claim, including, if warranted, returning the Work, as has been done in the past.

⁶ Virginia Museum of Fine Arts website, available at http://www.vmf.state.va.us/Press_Room/Collections/Ancient_Art_Collection_Fact_Sheet.aspx, last accessed 11/1/2013).

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