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“Reasons to Doubt: Misleading Assertions in the London Antiquities Market”



Over the last few years of media reporting on my identifications of looted antiquities in the market, the commentary has become more and more predictable; I am quoted and so is a spokesperson from Christie's, whenever that auction house is found to be selling antiquities depicted in the photographic archives confiscated from convicted dealers. It is time to examine those positions and comments more closely. I will approach the issue through discussion of two objects from a total of four identified in Christie's' April 2015 antiquities auction in London – the given collecting histories of these two objects in particular should have raised a red flag to Christie's before they came near a sale.

Toxic Antiquities

In the catalogue for Christie's spring 2015 antiquities auction, scheduled for 15th April, I identified four artefacts whose photographs were in the Medici and Becchina archives. The objects were: an Attic black-figured amphora dating to 540-520 B.C. (lot 83), an Etruscan terracotta antefix of the late 6th century B.C. (lot 102), an Apulian red-figured Hydria dating to 350-330 B.C. (lot 108) and an Apulian Gnathian-ware squat bottle dating around 320 B.C. (one of two vases comprising lot 113). No collecting history prior to 1970 was given for these antiquities in the auction catalogue; moreover, the collecting histories contain the tellingly vague phrase “anonymous sale” which, like “various properties” and “private Swiss collection,” has in the past proved to cover illicit antiquities dealers whom Christie's never mention in their catalogue histories. This fact, combined with the condition in which these objects are depicted in the archive photographs, strongly suggests that they come from illicit digs. I will discuss the two most obviously suspect, lots 102 and 108.

Christie's collecting history for the Etruscan antefix (lot 102) was very brief:

PROPERTY FROM A LONDON COLLECTION

PROVENANCE:

Anonymous sale; Sotheby's, London, 9 December 1985, lot 273,
when acquired by the present owner.

See Figure 1: Etruscan antefix (lot 102) in Christie's

This same object, however, appears depicted on a red cloth, still covered with soil, among other fragmented Etruscan antiquities in a Polaroid image from the Medici archive.

See Figure 2: The same Etruscan antefix in a Medici Polaroid

Since the work of Watson and Todeschini, it is common knowledge that Giacomo Medici was regularly

consigning illicit antiquities to Sotheby's in London during the 1980s; it is therefore highly probable that the anonymous consigner in the 1985 Sotheby's auction in London was Medici himself or, more likely, a person working for him. Christie's do not name the consigner of the antefix to Sotheby's in 1985 or the London collector who consigned it in 2015. It does not require an exhaustive 'due diligence' procedure for Sotheby's and Christie's to communicate such details, especially if that would prove that the consigner was not associated with Medici and the object was rightfully included in the two London auctions as licit.

My second example from the same auction is the Apulian red-figured hydria (lot 108), presented by Christie's as follows:

PROPERTY FROM A LONDON COLLECTION

PROVENANCE:

Anonymous sale; Sotheby's, London, 8 December 1986, lot 183,
when acquired by the present owner.

PUBLISHED:

A.D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, *Second Supplement to The Red figured Vases of Apulia*, London, 1991, no.17/31a.

See Figure 3: Hydria (lot 108) in Christie's

The similarity of the hydria's provenance with that of the antefix is striking. They both come from a London collection and both reappear in the 2015 auction after their anonymous sale in Sotheby's London branch in the mid-1980s. One wonders if the same collection in London housed both antiquities for 30 years. But while the antefix originates from Giacomo Medici, the hydria is depicted in two images from the Becchina archive, photographed on a marble square base regularly used by Becchina to photograph antiquities; bright reflections on the vase's surface and the angle from which the vase was photographed suggest that the image was not professional.

See Figure 4: The same hydria in a Becchina photograph

Moreover, documents from the Becchina archive link the object more firmly to Becchina's family. From a letter by Mr Oliver Forge on behalf of Sotheby's antiquities department, dated February 18, 1986, it seems that the hydria was originally due to be auctioned in April 1985; Mr Forge writes to apologise to Mrs Anna Spinello that it was not included, and informs her that the vase will be in the July 1986 auction. As Watson and Todeschini informed us (2007: 293), Anna Spinello was the married name of Gianfranco Becchina's sister; it appears that Becchina was consigning antiquities in Sotheby's using that name. The hydria indeed appeared in Sotheby's auction of July 14, 1986 in London (as lot 172), but remained unsold; it reappeared a few months later in the auction of December 8, 1986 where it finally sold for £3190. In that December catalogue of Sotheby's it has no provenance at all (appearing merely under "various properties" with an estimated price of £4800-£6000).

Christie's 2015 provenance likewise does not include the July 1986 auction. One might think that this was a failure of their much-advertised due diligence process (Bernheimer in Loader Wilkinson 2011), except that the A.D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou publication cited in the Christie's catalogue for this hydria states (1991:117):

Once London Market, Sotheby's, Sale Cat. 14 July 1986, no. 172, ill. on p. 78; 8-9 Dec. 1986, no. 183, ill. on p. 82.

In citing a publication which refers to the appearance of the vase in July 1986 in Sotheby's, Christie's *chose* not to include it in the "provenance" of their 2015 auction. Only the December 1986 auction is mentioned; that of July 1986 is omitted by both Sotheby's and Christie's probably because to record an unsuccessful sale would detract from the hydria's desirability.

For these two objects, anonymously consigned to Sotheby's in the 1980s, Christie's have no excuse for not having any concerns or doubts about their provenance. Their appearance in the confiscated archives verifies suspicions of the involvement of convicted antiquities dealers.

Repetitions

After I notified Interpol, the Italian authorities and Scotland Yard's Art Squad, Christie's withdrew all four objects from the auction. Nothing has been heard of them since. This is one of three outcomes which have become familiar after all the years of my finding such tainted objects in one or more of the three major auction houses – Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams – every year since 2007. In other cases, objects I found have been repatriated to Greece or Italy; in a few of those cases, Christie's had proceeded with the sale despite my informing the relevant authorities and publishing these identifications on specialist blogs (*Looting Matters*, *ARCA blog*, *Market of Mass Destruction*) before the auction.

Such repeated findings reveal that there has been no real ethical improvement in the post-1970s international antiquities market since the basic shape of the illicit network was revealed for the general public ten years ago in Watson and Todeschini 2006 (updated edition 2007). In the interim, more than 320 masterpieces depicted in the archives have been repatriated (mainly to Italy, a few to Greece) from prestigious North American museums, private collections and antiquities galleries, and the quality of the photographic and documentary evidence in the archives is such that none of those institutions or individuals have ever tried to defend in court any of their acquisitions claimed by Italy or Greece. In the museum world, however, acquisition policies have changed; discoveries of looted objects are ongoing, but a previous generation of curators was responsible for these objects. By contrast, the art market resists, despite continuous recent scandals. Auction houses are still effectively “laundering” objects coming on to the market from “anonymous” sources; Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams advertise that they exercise “due diligence,” in an attempt to make their potential customers feel safer, but until they change their policies, we are bound to see more tainted antiquities on offer. Public opinion has become more informed about the extent of the illicit network controlling the international antiquities market. Nevertheless, almost every antiquities sale in a prominent auction house in London or New York yields some identifications from the confiscated archives, suggesting that the antiquities market does not yet accept that the days of unmonitored trading are long gone.

Replies to Christie's Defence

The comments of the Christie's spokesperson, reported in *Scottish Legal News* on 14th April 2015, standardly appear as part of auction houses' defensive rhetoric when found to be trading antiquities depicted in the confiscated archives. I have divided them into three points, and now reply to each.

Christie's first point is always to emphasize the thoroughness of their “due diligence” on all objects:

“Christie's would never sell anything we know or have reason to believe has been stolen, and we devote considerable time and money to investigating the objects in our care.”

“We consult academic, police, civil, national and international lists of stolen works and when we publish our catalogues, we welcome scrutiny to help us ensure our information is correct.”

“In this case, although we have no reason to doubt our information, we are happy to conduct further research.”

Since lots 102 and 108 were in the catalogue as 1980s anonymous consignments to Sotheby's, Christie's, based on their knowledge of *The Medici Conspiracy*, must have had “reason to believe” that the items were toxic. As for their “further research:” a Christie's employee at an international conference on cultural heritage in June 2014, organised by the University of Kent at Canterbury, stated during a session that Christie's never make public the results of their internal investigations.

Second, Christie's argue that they *did* contact the Italian authorities, as here reported indirectly by *Scottish Legal News*:

The spokesperson said the Carabinieri – Italy’s national military police – have not responded in the past but that Christie’s is currently in touch with both the Greek and Italian authorities.

Such public claims are always worded very carefully to imply more efforts on the part of Christie’s than is really the case. At the annual conference of the Association for Research into Crimes against Art in June 2015, the Head of the Carabinieri Data Processing Unit stated publicly that since he took command (2012) only once had members of the market made an enquiry, concerning four or five objects. The official position of the Carabinieri is that they will cooperate with anyone who will offer equal terms of transparency; enquirers should identify themselves, the reasons of their enquiry and the present whereabouts of the antiquities concerned. Even if it was Christie’s who contacted the Carabinieri on this single occasion, they apparently did not reply to these three questions, at least in such a way as to enable effective due diligence.

The third point concerns Christie’s access to the confiscated archives:

“We call on those with access to the Becchina and Medici archive[s] to make them freely available to auction houses so that we can check them as part of our pre-catalogue due diligence process.”

“To be clear, what we are asking is access and full transparency for us but also for the art market as a whole. We would like to see a copy of the Becchina and Medici databases (and indeed any other official database or record of objects believed to have been stolen or looted) be provided to the ALR [Art Loss Register] and/or added to the Interpol database of stolen cultural works.”

“This is a very transparent and effective way of ensuring that the world is on notice of objects which are alleged to have been looted or stolen. It is how all other governments and police organisations register stolen cultural property. We do not understand why this has not been done.”

The archives are the property of the Italian and Greek authorities and only they have the right to make them available. I suggest two reasons why they do not wish to do so. One is that the archives form evidence in ongoing criminal investigations. It would be highly unusual for such evidence to be made public before the whole investigation is concluded. Although 20 years have passed since confiscation of the first archive, only 280 objects have been repatriated from the tens of thousands depicted in the archives, several cases are ongoing, and the bulk of the objects are still to be discovered. Second, the behaviour of the market so far in relation to the tainted objects they have been found trading has given state authorities no reason to think that antiquities traders would voluntarily notify authorities of objects matching archive images, if the archives were freely released. As things are, for the majority of objects withdrawn from sale, Christie’s will not reveal their whereabouts unless so forced by state authorities. It is therefore most likely that with the archives made available, all objects matching images in the archives would thereafter be traded underground, never again to surface in the official art market and so have a chance of external identification.

Conclusion: A Simpler Solution

For years now, Christie’s much-advertised due diligence has not been working, as proved by the withdrawal and repatriation of the antiquities that I have identified over the last few years. Before the printing of each antiquities auction catalogue, Christie’s should be contacting the Carabinieri Data Unit where all the confiscated archives are kept, and cooperating fully with that team in checking each object.

However, there is a much simpler solution to the question of how to stop post-1970s illicit material from tainting the art market. The truth is that an honest market, which accepts the cut-off date provided by the UNESCO 1970 Convention against antiquities trafficking, does not need access to the confiscated archives. Simply by excluding from the sales any object that lacks a pre-1970 documented collecting history, as museums now do in their acquisitions, the art market will automatically exclude all the Medici, Becchina and Symes illicit antiquities. It is true that objects lacking provenance prior to 1970 are not the exception, but the rule in sales catalogues published so far. Therefore, the reason that the market does not adopt my suggested policy can only be the projected loss of financial profit made from selling objects with inadequate collecting histories. But an informed public that cares about morality will force the antiquities market eventually to reform.

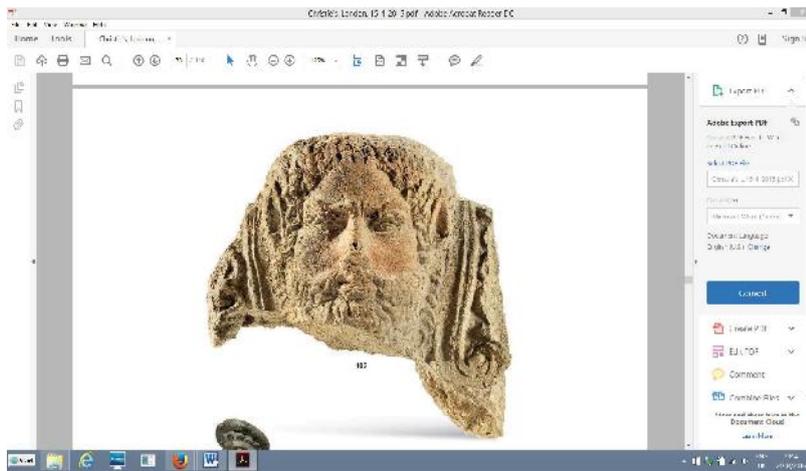


Figure 1: Etruscan antefix (lot 102) in Christie's



Figure 2: The same Etruscan antefix in a Medici Polaroid



Figure 4: The same hydria in a Becchina photograph

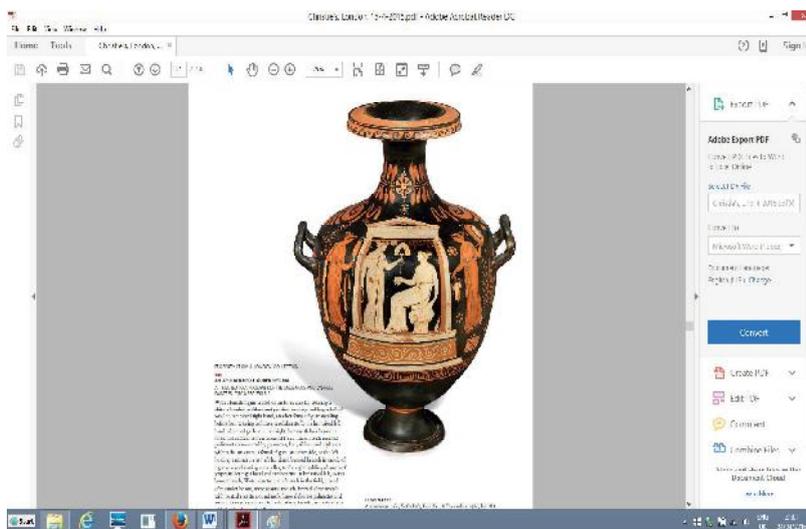


Figure 3: Hydria (lot 108) in Christie's

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