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Five Reasons You Shouldn't Buy That Ancient Artifact

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As an archaeologist who works in Italy, I usually get contacted a few times a yea by someone wanting to know if an artifact they bought on vacation somewhere in Europe is authentic. Surely an expert on Roman culture can give detailed information on a pot or a statuette, figure out if it's authentic, and estimate its value, right? Not quite. Professional archaeologists are bound by codes of ethics The two national organizations I belong to, the Society for American Archaeology and the Archaeological Institute of America, both exhort archaeologists to avoid "activities that enhance the commercial value" of archaeological objects. We are not and should not be in the business of appraising antiquities, and my response to these queries involves trying to educate people on the reasons behind these ethics.

So why shouldn't you buy that ancient artifact on vacation? It has nothing to do with the "mummy's curse" and everything to do with legal, scientific, and ethica issues. Many people think there is no harm in collecting a piece of the past and that they are investing in history, but here's why they couldn't be more wrong:

Damascus Museum employees wrap archaeological artifacts into boxes to protect them from being... [+]

1. The object is most likely fake. Fake artifacts have a long history around the world, as even the Romans were copying original Greek sculptures, and chances are the pot or statuette you find in a small town in a foreign country wa produced for the tourist market. Some countries, such as Israel, have laws that mandate sellers specifically mention when something is a replica, but these law are not always followed.

2. If it isn't fake, it may be illegal. Buying and bringing antiquities back to your home country may be illegal. In 1970, UNESCO wrote a convention on cultural property. The countries that adopted it -- now totalling 128 -- were required to set up cultural heritage guidelines and laws to prevent illegal impor

and export of ancient objects. These regulations were put in place at different times by different countries, but the 1970 date has stuck as a short-hand becaus of the Association of Art Museum Directors' widely-adopted guidelines to the acquisition of archaeological material and ancient art.

3. Its trade helps fuel international conflicts and wars. In current conflicts in Syria and Egypt and ongoing ones in Iraq, archaeological sites are literal battlegrounds, and radical terrorist groups count antiquities sales among their income streams. This makes for difficult ethical quandaries for archaeologists, who have dual obligations to protect cultural heritage and to pu aside ancient history to help modern people. By dint of existing, the lucrative antiquities market means conflicts will involve damaging, destroying, or ransoming ancient objects and sites.

4. It may have been procured from looting of archaeological sites, which destroys our ability to understand the past. As soon as artifacts are taken out of the ground, their specific context disappears. Archaeologists record all the data we can -- not just what an artifact looks like, but how it is related to other artifacts, people, and buildings -- with increasingly sophisticate techniques. Driven usually by the desire to make money off of the sale of newly-found artifacts, many looters break into artifact storage areas or, worse yet, dig haphazardly in the ground. Looters prevent us from fully understanding the pa by destroying the archaeological context of artifacts.

5. It probably can't be donated to a museum. Indiana Jones taught us th artifacts belong in a museum, and some collectors get tax breaks for donating their items. But since the 1970 UNESCO convention, museums have tightened their guidelines for what they can and cannot accept. The J. Paul Getty Museun is the most high-profile museum to come under fire for acquiring objects with

less-than-clean bills of sale. Last month, a couple dozen items were returned to Italy from public and private collections around the U.S., and thousands of iten have been repatriated in the last decade. If an artifact doesn't have a spotless history, a museum won't touch it.

Some of the 11 ancient coffins containing Jewish bones from the Second Temple period are seen after... [+]

The U.S. is the biggest art market in the world, followed by China and the U.K., and therefore we all need to be aware of looting, black-market art trade, and ou ethical responsibilities to our collective past and to present conflicts. Looting and illicit antiquities trading destroy our ability to learn about the past and contribute to the marginalization of modern people around the world.

What should you do if you are already in possession of suspected antiquities or

you're unsure of their provenance? If you've inherited an arrowhead collection your grandfather dug up on his farm, go ahead and email an archaeologist at your local university, as she may be able to help you confirm that finds made or private land are historic or prehistoric. But if you have potentially ancient objects from another country without good documentation prior to 1970 or that were imported after that date, my best advice is to contact either a reputable appraiser or auction house, or to contact a lawyer who specializes in art, antiquities, or cultural heritage. They are better equipped to offer helpful, legally-informed advice than archaeologists are.

For more on the antiquities market, the *New York Times* has some stellar pieces in their Art & Design beat, such as: "The Curse of the Outcast Artifact," "Germany Plans to Tighten Regulation of Art and Antiquities Trade," and "Is the U.S. Protecting Foreign Artifacts? Don't Ask."

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As a bioarchaeologist, I routinely pore over the skeletons of ancient populations so that I can learn about their health, diet, and lifestyles.