

By Sanchita Balachandran

Edge of an Ethical Dilemma

Should a conservator risk her reputation to preserve suspect artifacts, or let them fall apart?

A client of mine, an amateur historian and art collector, brought me a deteriorating Roman sword he purchased from the online auction site eBay. He asked me to clean, stabilize, and preserve it. As I examined the orange-red corrosion and white salt encrustations, noting fragments that had exploded off the surface and areas only a few millimeters thick, I realized I might be professionally obligated *not* to conserve it. The sword had no provenance or export documents to prove it had been scientifically excavated or lawfully sold.

Art conservators are dedicated to preserving cultural heritage and we deplore looting and damage to archaeological sites and artifacts. We are also acutely aware of the harm that can occur from leaving fragile objects unconserved. Deciding whether to work on the sword was a moment of crisis in my career. Conserving it could be considered unethical or unprofessional, while ignoring the piece could put it at risk of disintegrating. Was I accountable to the physical artifact, my profession, or the archaeological community?

The conservation world has debated this question since the 1990s, when publications on the issue appeared. Several authors in *Antiquities Trade or Betrayed*, edited by conservator Kathryn Walker Tubb, estimated that at least 80 percent of antiquities on the market may have been stolen or illegally excavated. Some conservators argue it is our duty to preserve any object, rather than risk losing artistic and technical information. Others insist these materials lose significance

without archaeological context, and that conservation might add monetary value and encourage looting.

I became interested in conservation because it combines art history, the physical sciences, and hands-on work with artistic and historic objects. Relatively few people have



the opportunity to touch art, but the trained conservator has intimate, physical access to it, a tactile experience that is humbling, exhilarating, and occasionally nerve-racking. Though our work is guided by objective scientific standards, holding a moment of history in one's hands—such as a sword a Roman soldier once wielded—is a visceral, awe-inspiring experience.

A conservator's first responsibility is to document an artifact's condition: its cracks, missing fragments, powdery surfaces, paint remnants, and so on. These details tell us about the environment from which an object came and guide its treatment. Techniques such as X-radiography, X-ray fluorescence, and scanning electron microscopy can tell us more, but the

conservator's eyes and experience are his or her most important tools.

For archaeological materials, a conservator should know where and under what conditions they were found, as this can determine how well artifacts will survive. In scientific excavations, this information is readily available because archaeologists meticulously document all finds and burial conditions. On site in Egypt and Cambodia, I have collaborated with archaeologists to identify problems we might expect in certain places, such as salty or wet areas. Unprovenanced artifacts have lost much or all of this context, so the conservator must rely on the object alone. My client could only identify the Roman sword, based on its shape and size, as being from "the Balkan region." It may have lain for thousands of years in a wet, salty, oxygen-free deposit, where even iron can retain much of its form, but then rapidly deteriorated once excavated. How long ago was this sword dug up? Had it been over-cleaned or purposely corroded to improve its market value? The sword was so deteriorated that these questions were difficult to answer.

Conservators are attuned to miniscule but significant details. As I examined the sword's hilt under a microscope, I found an impression of leather and textile once tied to the weapon and buried with it. I could even discern the weave pattern, though the fragile textile has been lost forever. These small but revealing traces are most likely to disappear when an artifact deteriorates. The sword clearly needed attention, but I had not yet decided to work on it.

I consulted with conservator and archaeologist colleagues, who cringed at my description of the sword's condition. Intact iron artifacts are important because they were ubiquitous in ancient times and well-preserved ones are rare today. But archaeological iron is one of the most challenging materials to preserve because it is sensitive to environmental changes. Everyone cautioned against treating the sword, warning that I might compromise my professional reputation.

I had recently left the protective world of museums, where curators and registrars decide issues of export and provenance. Having formed my own company, I was worried that not trying harder to determine where the Roman sword came from might imply a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The thought was terrifying. I might be risking my professional and ethical standards for a few hundred dollars.

I was compelled to conserve the sword not by the money, but by my professional and emotional desire to preserve it. Corrosion and salt blooms had devoured much of the surface. The once sharp edge looked like it had been gnawed by small teeth. The precariously etched textile impression was flaking away and would soon be lost. In that instance, I chose my responsibility to the sword over the archaeological community. But I also decided never to work on unprovenanced objects again, and to speak to my client about his collecting.

Conserving the sword was in itself a small-scale excavation. I removed the corrosion and encrustations with specialized tools and carefully saved all the powder and tiny fragments because with each pass of my scalpel I might have removed evidence of its burial environment. I also took detailed notes and photographs of all stages of the treatment.

While I worked, I researched the ethical and legal issues of collecting and preserving unprovenanced antiquities, and prepared a document

about them for the client. I felt uneasy looking at satellite images of hundreds of illegal craters brutally gouged into archaeological sites in Iraq. At times it seemed futile to re-adhere thin metal slivers when I had seen photos of churned soil and potsherds left in the wake of looters. Perhaps most chillingly, I learned that I could be prosecuted for conserving the sword without the legitimate owner's permission. Later, I spoke with Thomas Kline, a lawyer who has worked on stolen antiquities cases. He said that altering an object without its true owner's permission, even if only to stabilize it, can make a conservator liable for damages. "There should be some effort to ensure ownership of an object," he said. "The 'don't ask, don't research, don't document' approach is an eggshell. It gives you a patina of deniability, but [a lawyer] can easily penetrate it."

The relief I felt when I returned the sword was matched by my nervousness when I sent the client a long e-mail explaining why I could not work on any more of his unprovenanced antiquities. I explained the legal and ethical issues he should consider as a person interested in cultural heritage, and provided links to all of the institutions that had spoken out against this form of collecting. I hoped we could begin a meaningful dialogue.

As a serious enthusiast of Roman history, he hoped his collection would someday be acquired by a local museum. I guided him to the policies of several cultural institutions unwilling to accept or purchase objects without proper documentation. I knew he would be disheartened to learn how illegal excavations damage archaeological sites, so I sent him news and video clips about the looting of Balkan sites. And I tried to explain that he was engaging in a potentially illegal activity.

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He took several days to digest my e-mail and respond with pointed questions. Why would a museum refuse his collection while accepting and glorifying unprovenanced objects donated by wealthier, more prominent collectors? Why was there no blanket international agreement governing the antiquities trade? Why was the 1970 UNESCO convention to combat the illegal trade and transport of cultural property so poorly enforced? And shouldn't we preserve looted objects if they are the only traces of a destroyed archaeological site? He was right—the museum and archaeological worlds are still grappling with these hypocrisies. I could only suggest that he follow his conscience.

But I felt an obligation to him. If I was advising him against collecting, how else could he channel his passion for the ancient world? I suggested—he later called this “the light at the end of the tunnel”—that he volunteer on an active excavation to understand the interconnectedness of artifacts and where they are found. I also urged him to sponsor the documentation or conservation of a museum collection or site, or attend archaeology conferences.

A few months later, he wrote to say he would no longer collect antiquities, and that he would volunteer on an excavation and visit some archaeological sites. His change of heart reminded me how poorly the archaeological and conservation communities communicate with the public. Instead of simply chastising collectors, we should demystify our fields and provide avenues for interaction with cultural heritage. When I heard his plans, I was elated, humbled, and relieved. I'd never expected that talking myself out of a client's business would feel so...right.

But I had still conserved the sword. Would I do it again? Though on an emotional level I may want to stabilize an artifact in dire physical condition, as a professional, I would refuse and instead talk to the collector. Of course, I would also report any obviously looted or stolen object to the authorities. But the humbler “orphan”

fragments of the ancient world, which aren't immediately recognizable, are more problematic, as they are less ethically and legally troublesome for collectors. As conservators, we are in some cases obliged to stand back and allow these artifacts to disappear, claiming what sometimes feels like a hollow ethical victory.

After this experience, I spoke with conservators Kathryn Walker Tubb of University College London and Catherine Sease of Yale University, two of the strongest voices pressing collectors and conservators to consider their impact on the world's archaeological heritage. “In our profession there's really an ingrained belief that we've got to take care of everything, including these [unprovenanced objects],” said Sease. However, as Tubb pointed out, “There is a lot of legitimately excavated material that isn't getting the attention it needs.” Both agreed conservators are better served by working only on scientifically excavated objects.

I asked both if there were any circumstances under which the conservation of unprovenanced objects might be justified. Vulnerable material, they suggested, such as waterlogged objects that would literally disintegrate if left untreated, might be an exception. “I still wouldn't touch that material with a barge pole other than to say to keep it wet,” Tubb said.

“You learn to be fairly philosophical about it,” Sease told me. “You can't save everything.”

But there are more and more objects that we cannot save, given the fluidity and anonymity of today's art market. It is troubling that the same Internet that offers countless pages dedicated to the preservation of archaeological sites also enables the trade in looted antiquities. Shouldn't we be concerned that many of the top hits of a Google search for “antiquities” link to websites that sell them? ■

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