

NEWS AND VIEWS

A Classic Case of Irresponsibility

THE Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has probably bought more than it bargained for with its recent acquisition of a splendid Greek painted vase of the sixth century BC. The museum by its purchase has undoubtedly fallen conspicuously below the standards of responsibility now expected of great archaeological institutions, and is in consequence likely to suffer a considerable dent in its prestige internationally. The resulting publicity must be causing several museums to take stock of their purchasing policies just now.

The resentment widely felt by practising archaeologists at underhand dealings on the antiquities market must be viewed against the background of the world-wide pillaging of archaeological sites, which has increased dramatically and disastrously during the past decade. In Guatemala and Mexico, for instance, looters are using power saws to cut into pieces the wonderful sculpted stelae of the Mayan civilization. Merle G. Robinson has described (*Amer. Antiquity*, 37, 147; 1972) cases where such sculptures have been split into pieces by fire to make them more portable, and was herself held at gunpoint by looters, posing as policemen, at the site of Itsimte. The resulting fragments, even when evidently sawn from a larger monument, command thousands of dollars on the art market.

The archaeological objection to such practices is not simply repugnance at theft and vandalism. The essential point is that monuments, objects and artefacts, however beautiful they may be as art works, lose most of their meaning when divorced from the context in which they are found. This applies to a Mayan stele ripped from the site to which it belongs (and to which its inscription refers), a coin in a Roman-British settlement located by a metal detector and dug up by "treasure seekers", or a Greek vase found in an Etruscan tomb with other objects and divorced from them for sale to a "connoisseur". In each case the irreparable loss is information. The destruction is going ahead at such a rate that there are now several aspects of man's past, formerly accessible to study, about which archaeologists will always be ignorant. To the irreparable damage in Mesoamerica must be added the archaeological rape of Cyprus, the ransacking of the Cycladic cemeteries of Greece, and especially the continuing plunder of the Etruscan cemeteries of Italy—the centre of an extensive antiquities trade for more than a century.

The archaeological world has now realized that policing the sites, although desirable, is not everywhere practicable. The solution must come from a new sense of responsibility among museums and private collectors. Pieces should be purchased only when their legitimate provenance is securely known, whether from authorized methodical excavation or from existing, recognized (and published) private collections. Anybody who buys antiquities in different circumstances is sustaining the market in plundered material. The Unesco draft convention on the safeguarding of archaeological sites (*Antiquity*, 45, 246; 1971) sets clear guidelines, and lead-

ing institutions, such as the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and Harvard University (*Antiquity*, 46, 90; 1972) have drawn up conventions to ensure that their purchases do not directly or indirectly support looting or the illicit export of antiquities from the country of origin.

It is in this context that the Metropolitan Museum's purchase, for a reported \$1,000,000, of an Attic red-figure vase, dated to about 510 BC and depicting a scene relating to the death of Sarpedon by the painter Euphronios, must be judged. It was acquired from an American dealer resident in Rome, who has in the past been charged with the violation of antiquities laws. He, in turn, claims to have obtained it from an Armenian antiquities dealer in Beirut (*The Observer*, February 25, 1973), but the vase has not previously been described, and there are grounds for suspecting it to have been illicitly excavated in Italy during the past five years.

That the museum should buy "the best Greek vase there is", in such circumstances and for a sum far in excess of any previously paid for a Greek vase, is scandalous enough; reminiscent, indeed, of the purchase by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts of a golden treasure (see *Nature*, 232, 515; 1971) which had obviously been illegally exported from some east Mediterranean land.

The attitude of the museum's officials is yet more shocking. Dietrich von Bothmer, the curator of Roman and Greek art and an internationally recognized authority, is credited in *The Times* of February 20, 1973, with the following statement:

"I want to know whether it is genuine or fake. Its intermediate history is not important to archaeology. Why can't people look at it simply as archaeologists do, as an art object?" When asked whether he suspected that the vase could have been smuggled out of Italy recently, Mr von Bothmer answered: "I am not suspecting anything. The thing I was concerned about was whether the object was genuine, whether the object was worth the money we spent on it."

The pronouncement, echoing some of the less scrupulous nineteenth century "art lovers", that the circumstances of archaeological finds may be dismissed as "intermediate history", must rank as a classic of irresponsibility. More seriously, the admission of such a view—whatever the origin of the Euphronios vase itself—saddles the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a substantial measure of responsibility, albeit perhaps indirect, for the present looting and destruction of archaeological sites in the world at large.

The contumely of the scientific community in general, coupled with strong public pressure (for the scandal has been widely reported in the press), may yet bring the officials of the Metropolitan Museum to appreciate the magnitude of their present irresponsibility and the discredit which they bring upon the world of art scholarship.

From our Archaeology Correspondent