



The Circulating Artefacts project: A platform against the looting and trafficking of illicit antiquities

Marcel Marée

The British Museum's Department of Egypt and Sudan has launched a major initiative against the rampant global trade in illicit antiquities. We are developing a platform supporting all those, irrespective of background or profession, who want to help counteract the problem. The project, named 'Circulating Artefacts' (CircArt), is made possible by a grant of just under one million sterling from the Cultural Protection Fund, a scheme run by the British Council on behalf of Britain's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The platform under construction centres around a database of antiquities found in the trade and in private hands. This will be a powerful research tool, developed and maintained by subject specialists, that makes it harder to buy or sell illicit artefacts – unwittingly or intentionally.

The system is developed to enable ever wider geographical coverage, but the current focus is on antiquities from Egypt and Sudan, in particular those found for sale since the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property. Looting in Egypt and Sudan has reached alarming levels: many archaeological sites are now riddled with recent robbers' pits, and museums and magazines have also been targeted. Countless illicit objects are now held by art galleries, auction houses and private vendors, who feel quite at liberty to do as they please thanks to poor regulation, the anonymity of suppliers, and a widespread disregard for undocumented object provenances. Looting is particularly endemic across Egypt, but Sudan is not immune to the problem (Plate 1). If anything, the problem will spread as Egypt is now a conduit for antiquities trafficked out of Sudan, with smugglers exploiting improved infrastructure linking both countries.

In the project, the British Museum works closely with colleagues at the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) in Khartoum and Egypt's Ministry of

Antiquities. We also answer calls for assistance from many law enforcement agencies, who do not typically possess in-house archaeological expertise. A growing number of dealers and collectors are likewise engaging with the platform, sending us images and data for appraisal and documentation. We welcome their constructive stance.

So what exactly are we going to do? First and foremost, the platform will ensure that the international art market comes under closer scrutiny by subject specialists. Archaeological experts have a vital role to play in the detection and interception of illegal antiquities – a responsibility that many have been remarkably slow to recognise. We encourage anyone who cares about illicit trade to sign up to the platform and use the free service we provide: the vetting of communicated artefacts. In a departure from the usual vetting practice at art fairs, we deem it our duty to assess questions of provenance, not just of authenticity. By offering the world a central point of contact over such questions, the platform will make it easy for buyers and sellers to meet higher standards of due diligence than have been previously attainable. Registered users of the platform can enquire with us if there are any possible issues with objects in their own or someone else's possession. If we identify conclusive evidence that the object is tainted, we will advise the owner that the object is unfit for sale, and that relevant authorities will have to be informed. Dealers and collectors who regularly communicate objects to us deserve recognition and will be named, if they wish, on the forthcoming Circulating Artefacts website. But this is not the only way for them to show that they are serious about good practice.

For each object that is brought to our attention (there is no value threshold), the communicator is given the object's CircArt database record number. This number can then be cited in future sales that feature the object. However, signing up to our platform constitutes an agreement that objects identified as tainted or illicit will neither be offered for sale nor returned to the consignor or previous owner. Breaching that agreement ends the dealer's access to the platform, and puts them at greater risk of negative exposure and tainted sales. It must, however, be realised that a CircArt number published in a sale is no guarantee that the object is legal, nor does it constitute a certificate. It only demonstrates that a seller has made the effort to consult our platform about



Plate 1. A relief of Ramesses VI recovered from looters, and suspected to come from Amara (photo: W. V. Davies).

the object, and that CircArt has a file about it, which may well keep evolving. Potential buyers, not just sellers, should exercise due diligence and are advised to consult the platform about any object considered for purchase, whether or not it has already a CircArt number. Dealers who communicate their objects to us, in receiving such numbers in return, will gain an edge on less principled competitors, because conscientious collectors will prefer to buy antiquities that have been vetted for provenance and authenticity. As the CircArt platform will be easy and free to sign up to and consult, it will leave no room for poor excuses and wilful ignorance in handling tainted objects. It is now for dealers and collectors, both private *and* public, to show to what extent they conduct their activities in 'good faith'.

The data we collect pertain to circulating artefacts as well as associated actors, places and events. We do not just wait for data and images to be communicated to us: we proactively gather them from thousands of sale catalogues (online and printed) and other publications. That said, we receive a growing proportion of material straight from dealers, collectors, fellow academics, the police, and the general public. We also work closely with art crime researchers examining illicit activity in social network groups.

The data are organised in a highly secure, semantic database, enabling the investigation and visualisation of complex information such as patterns of behaviour and repeated links between data clusters. The system helps us carefully document, track and reconstruct the journeys and histories of objects and object groups. It also helps us spot conflicts between purported provenances and evidence contained in the objects themselves. Direct access to the data is restricted (in varying degrees) to law enforcement agencies, antiquities authorities, and academics involved in the project. However, anyone can contact us to request an object search or assessment.

What makes our database different from other databases of cultural property? Most importantly, we record *all* objects seen in the trade and in private hands, not just those that have been reported stolen (for example to the Art Loss Register or to Interpol). Many thefts have not been widely reported, and the vast majority of tainted antiquities were illegally excavated and never reported at all. So in our project we document objects of legal, illegal and unknown status, in the full expectation that many provenances will eventually be clarified. Within the first year of the project's inception, our research has enabled the identification of several thousand artefacts that are demonstrably illicit. There can be no doubt that this trend will continue, ensuring that cultural property will be increasingly protected from unscrupulous handlers and sellers, and that buyers will be better protected from unwitting association with tainted objects, with all the accompanying financial and reputational damage. Better protected, that is, if they engage with the platform.

The database comes with a programme of training and

expertise sharing, helping antiquities authorities to build investigative skills and use the platform to best effect. We supply guidance and equipment to heritage professionals and to local authorities. They learn how to search and feed the database, and how to spot illicit objects that might otherwise pass unnoticed. We also help them better understand the workings of the antiquities trade and the legal framework in which it operates. Guest speakers in the programme include legal experts, art crime investigators, and representatives of the art market itself. Trainees also improve the skills and networks needed to recover illicit artefacts. Four of NCAM's staff have spent three months of on-the-job training at the British Museum (Plate 2): Ikhlas Abdllatif, el-Hassan Ahmed, Ribab Khider, and Ayman el-Tayeb. NCAM now has a fully equipped office dedicated to continued involvement with the Circulating Artefacts project.



Plate 2. *Ayman el-Tayeb and Ribab Khider work on the CircArt database in the British Museum.*