A Collector's Odyssey

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The author recounts the process of acquiring a work of art, focusing on one object but encapsulating the thoughts and experience of many years. In so doing, she reflects on the value added to the appreciation of artistic works and her joy in sharing this with others through public display of her collection.

1 WE FIRST LEARN OF THE OBJECT

IN 1990, MY HUSBAND AND I heard that an ancient silver box was for sale. The dealer who offered the object knew of our interest in works that would show the influences of earlier cultures on Greek and Roman antiquities.

The box was round. Its lid was sealed. The bottom had fallen out, probably corroded by water. By some miracle, the vessel stood upright and was not crushed by rubble or debris. We had it X-rayed, which allowed us a glimpse beneath the corrosion that covered the entire surface. We could see the outline of a marvelous parade of lions—the animals depicted in very high relief. Two animals emerged from the corrosion on the lid of the box beneath the surface (figure 1).[1]

The dealer had test-cleaned a small section of the box, and we could see that it was made of silver, which was dark and brittle.

The price was high, and we could not be sure of what we were actually buying. Nevertheless, the box was intriguing. We decided we would take the risk.

2 COLLECTING: THE GOAL

As collectors, we believe we are preserving and expanding knowledge of the past. We didn't think of ourselves as collectors when we bought our first few antiquities. However, over the years, we have built a collection of interest to scholars as well as the general public, a collection that has grown from our love of ancient history and our admiration for the works of the past. When we began, some of our favorite reading included the catalogues of other collectors. We were particularly influenced by Norbert Schimmel, Leon Pomerance, and Alistair Bradley Martin, whose splendid objects were on display at the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum. We also studied the beautiful objects bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum by another great collector, Walter Baker. We hoped that we would be able to build a collection that would continue in their tradition.

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FIGURE 1.
THE SILVER URN AND LID BEFORE RESTORATION (PHOTO BY MEG LOEW CRAFT)

Today some archaeologists decry the purchase of antiquities. They believe that collecting encourages the looting of archaeological sites. They also believe that removing an object from the place where it was found means we will not be able to understand the object. It is not just the "context" that helps us understand an object—it is also painstaking scholarship. Would the Dead Sea Scrolls have had any value if they hadn't been deciphered, regardless of where they were found? To follow the line of thinking of those who believe all objects should remain in their country of origin would require that museums all over the world send their treasures away. Where, in fact, should some objects be sent? If a silver cup was made in ancient Athens and then exported to Sicily, is the vase the cultural property of the Greeks or the Italians?

While some objects appear on the market as a direct result of theft, sites are disrupted for a variety of reasons. The artifacts and sites of the ancient world are frequently disturbed by the concrete foundations that are required when a subway, a road or an apartment house is built.

Throughout history, war has been a time of dislocation—objects are plundered by invading armies. During the war in Sarajevo, the art museum was shelled for a thousand days and almost totally destroyed. In Iraq after the Per-

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sian Gulf War, antiquities began appearing on the international art market.[2] Many of the sellers were families that may have owned the antiquities for years and were hoping to raise cash. While it is romantic to believe that all objects can be saved, in many cases, only the monetary value of antiquities has, in fact, saved them. Think of the bronzes and silver objects that were melted down in the past for the value of their metals. Think of the Roman columns that were reused or ground down by succeeding builders to make cement.

Hydroelectric power projects that flood thousands of acres also destroy objects. When the Three Gorges Dam over the Yangtze River is completed, water will cover 1,300 unexcavated sites.[3] Farmers and peasants generally know where ancient objects have been buried. When word gets out that the land will be flooded, clandestine digging may occur. These objects, too, will eventually find their way on to the open market.

There will always be tomb robbers. It is not unusual for an archaeologist to uncover a site that had been untouched for hundreds of years, only to discover that the graves had been robbed in ancient times. The arrival of the metal detector resulted in a surge of ancient bronzes appearing on the market. Amateur sleuths, armed with these detectors, stormed across the countrysides looking for coins and small objects.

In the past, dealers were happy to reveal the exact location from which objects had been taken. But in the current hostile climate toward collecting, most dealers have discovered that they are better off not revealing this information. As a result, much valuable data is being lost. When the British Museum purchased the collection of Sir William Hamilton in 1772, it was customary to disclose this information. For example, the beautiful vase of Achilles slaying the Amazon queen Penthesilea by the Exekias Master was made in Athens and exported to Vulci, Italy, where it was found. In his introduction to the 1931 catalog of sculpture in the British Museum, Mr. F. N. Pryce is able to list most of the find spots for the Cypriot sculptures now in the Museum.

Of course, we would like to know exactly where our box was found. It might have been transported in ancient times. It might have come from ancient Bactria, and was probably made in the middle of the second millennium, B.C. In the 1960s, many antiquities routinely appeared on the market in Kabul. Just imagine what would have happened if all finds from this country had remained in the local museum. Many objects in the Kabul Museum are thought to be destroyed, victims of the relentless war that has been waged there.[4] Our silver box may, in fact, have been sold by insurgents who needed money to fight the invading Russians.

We bought the box. Although when we started collecting there was little talk of provenance, when we buy an object today, we routinely check with the Art Loss Register to find out if anyone has reported the object stolen. As collectors, we do not want to buy an object that was removed from a monument or stolen from a museum or church. Many museums have far more objects than they can publish, so if the box came from a museum storeroom, it is quite

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likely that there is no record of it. We also talk to museum curators and scholars and ask if they have heard anything about the object having been taken from a current excavation. Like many other collectors, we make a distinction between "stolen" objects and those that are "unknown and unfound."[5] Unfortunately, far more sites have been excavated than are documented in publications. So looking at excavation reports is not always helpful in determining whether we are buying something that was taken from a known site. In fact, we have become so concerned about the lack of publication of excavations that two years ago we established the Shelby White–Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications at Harvard University. Our goal was to help in the publication of excavations that had been concluded at least five years ago. Our first year, we received fifty-six applications, our second year, over ninety. We have so far awarded grants for more than $800,000.

Despite our research, we occasionally discover that we have purchased something that was taken from a museum. A small marble head in our collection had been taken by invading Germans during the war. We returned this treasure to the Greek government.

We consider ourselves preservers of the objects that we have acquired. We have, until such time as our collection will be given to a museum, the obligation to care for the objects. Scholars are always welcome to visit the collection, where our curator, Catherine Simon, can consult, look up references, and supply photos. We sometimes think we are living in a museum as more and more space has been given over to objects, books, conservation materials, and even packing crates (for we often lend works of art to museums). This summer more than fifty of our Iberian bronzes, marbles, and gold will travel to Greece, where they will be exhibited for several months at the Cycladic Museum. Last year bronzes from our collection traveled to Boston, Tampa, and Toledo for an exhibition on the manufacture of ancient bronzes.

3 CLEANING METHODOLOGY

Once we owned the silver box, we had to decide how to clean it. We wanted to use the best methods of conservation possible. Our curator at the time we acquired the box, Susanna Pancaldo, was studying conservation at the Institute of Fine Arts; she began detailed research into the latest methods of conservation.

We had several choices. We could have used a dealer's quickie method, such as acid, which was low-cost, and we would have had the box ready for display in a matter of weeks. However, such methods can leave artifacts stripped of signs of age and patina or cause irreversible damage. We found a conservator to clean the corrosion mechanically, using either a hand-held sharp tool or a high-speed electric vibrating tool. After several months, during which a small amount of the box had been cleaned, we reassessed the process. Our conclusion was that the mechanical cleaner, applied at high speed, was too abrasive. The fine detail was being lost.

Now we had to begin a new search for a conservator. We found an expert

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in Baltimore. She came to New York to look at the box, and after much discussion we agreed that she would undertake the necessary restoration. She would use an electrolytic reduction process to loosen the corrosion and make it easier to remove. She explained that she could work on the box for only a short period of time every day, because the process was so demanding.

Almost ten months after we had first seen the box, it was carefully packed for the trip to Baltimore. We received periodic reports about the process. To be sure that we had a complete record of the work being done, the vessel was repeatedly photographed. We also sent samples of the silver to Pieter Meyers, a silver expert at the Los Angeles County Museum.

The vessel was extremely fragile. Very light mechanical cleaning was done to remove some dirt and soften the chlorides. Finally, the electrolytic reduction treatment was carried out, with a current applied to the surface to reduce the corrosion. We asked the conservator to leave one area uncleaned. Perhaps some time in the future, experts will be able to tell something from the remains. We also decided not to try to remove the lid of the box, since it had adhered to the lower part, and we feared that attempting to separate the pieces could shatter the box. We journeyed to Baltimore to look at the progress. It was exciting to see those majestic lions, buried in corrosion for so long, emerge.

The conservator was also able to study the manufacture of the box. It is truly a marvel of the silversmith's art. There is simply no evidence of a seam around the entire body of the box. The absence of a seam means that the box was not cast. The conservator concluded that a skilled craftsman made the box from a lump of silver that was slowly raised up, and the animals pushed out from the inside. Who would have thought ancient silver workers could have been so skillful?

After almost two years, and many dollars in conservation costs, the box was finally clean, but there was still more to be done. Next, we called upon Jo Ann Wood to draw the design on paper so that we could have the entire frieze visible. This also took several weeks (figure 2).

We had only one more decision. Should we lacquer it to keep the silver from tarnishing, and if so, what kind of lacquer? Again, we consulted the expert conservators we knew. We wanted to know whether any surface coating we applied would permanently damage the silver, whether the silver would continue to tarnish, and what conditions would be best for the box once we decided to display it.[6] We did a patch test to study the results. The box was then checked periodically to see how the silver reacted. We finally felt ready to allow the conservator to proceed with the application of the lacquer. [7]

4 IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Since we did not know the exact place where our vessel was found, we began to look to comparable objects to try to date ours. Most of these animal-type boxes belong to the Bronze Age culture of northern Afghanistan and date to the early second millennium B.C.

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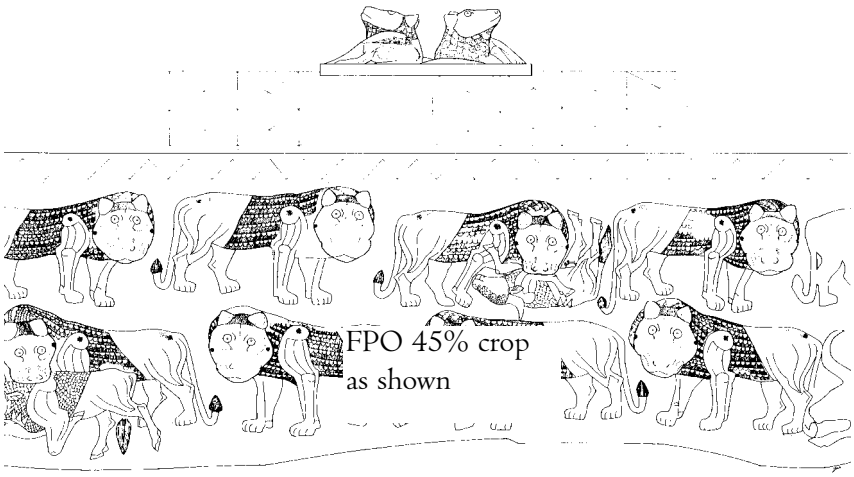


FIGURE 2.
THE DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE URN AS DRAWN BY JO ANN WOOD.

Our box is one of the most technically sophisticated and complete of all the boxes that survive. It is truly a masterpiece from the Bronze Age of Bactria (figure 3). The cup depicts lions trampling bulls. We do not know the symbolic meaning of this. If this object was in a tomb, the tomb might have also contained some ceramics, which might have given us more precision in the dating. But we still would not have had any writing to tell us who made the cup, who used it, how it was regarded when it was made, or why it managed



FIGURE 3.
THE RESTORED SILVER URN (PHOTO BY BRUCE WHITE)

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to survive. What we can see on this box is the influences coming from Iran, Mesopotamia, and the West and the results of interactions with the cultures of the Indus Valley that created a style unique to western central Asia.

We were, we thought, finally going to have the box to enjoy, but that was not to be. We received a call from Dr. Prudence Harper, Curator of Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum. Would we agree to lend the box to the museum? Of course, we could not say no. As collectors, we take pride in knowing that the works of art in our collection are viewed by visitors to the museums to which we continually loan them. We hope that of the more than 100,000 visitors who saw the collection when it was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in 1990, at least a few came away with a new appreciation for the greatness of past civilizations. Now, when we are at the Metropolitan, we go to visit our box, pleased that it may be enjoyed by millions of interested visitors.

NOTES

1. The cylindrical urn is approximately 9-½ inches high, with a diameter of approximately 7 ⅝ inches.

2. Barbara Crossette, Iraqis, Hurt by Sanctions, Sell Priceless Antiquities, *New York Times,* June 23, 1996, § 1, at 1.

3. Cristina Ruix, Three Gorges Dam, China, Farewell Ba? 8:75 *The Art Newspaper* 1 (November 1997).

4. The Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH), located in Islamabad, Pakistan, is seeking to recover objects that were removed from the Kabul Museum.

5. Comments of George Ortiz, published in Daniel Shapiro, Legal Issues in the Trade of Antiquities, 3:2 *International Journal of Cultural Property* 365, 370 (1994).

6. One of the best references for this was the article by Lyndsie S. Selwyn, "Historical Silver, Display and Storage" published by the Canadian Conservation Institute.

7. In 1992, we applied a coating of 12% Paraloid B-72, which proved to be too glossy and irregular in the display case. The coating was removed with acetone on February 1, 1993. While removing the coating, the conservator discovered a large amount of black tarnish in the Paraloid B-72. We were not certain of the source of the tarnish but as a precaution decided to add a tarnish-reducing agent to the inside of the display case.

At this point a fumed silica matting agent was added to the 12% Paraloid B-72 and reapplied. As the coating dried, a brush was used to increase the matte appearance and to prevent any pooling of liquid in any recesses of the silver.

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