

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, DIRECTOR,
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

MODERATOR: JONATHAN SALANT

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MR. SALANT: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. I'm Jonathan Salant, a
reporter for Bloomberg News and president of the press club. I'd like to welcome club members
and their guests in the audience today as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN.

Please hold your applause during the speech so we have time for as many questions as possible.
And for our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain, if you hear applause during the speech, it is
from the guests and the members of the general public who attend our luncheons, not from the
working press.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by ConnectLive and is available to club
members through the National Press Club website at www.press.org. Press club members may
also get free transcripts of our luncheons at our website. Nonmembers may buy transcripts,
audiotapes and videotapes by calling 1-888-343-1940. For more information about joining the
press club, please call us at area code 202-662-7511.

Before introducing our head table, I would like to remind our audience of future speakers: On April 19th, Scott Bakula, actor and the first commander of the USS Enterprise; April 20th, John Negroponte, the National Intelligence director; on April 27th, Christina Norman, president of MTV Networks; and on May 8th, Senator Russ Feingold, Wisconsin Democrat.

If you have any questions for our speaker, please write them on the cards provided at your table and pass them up to me. I will ask as many as time permits.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. Please hold your applause until all of the head table guests are introduced. From your right -- William Neikirk of the Chicago Tribune; Carl Leubsdorf, Washington bureau chief for The Dallas Morning News; Sharon Cott, senior vice president and general counsel for the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Jerry Zremski of The Buffalo News and the vice president of the National Press Club; Edith de Montebello, wife of the speaker; Angela Greiling Keane, associate editor of Traffic World magazine and the vice chair of the speakers committee.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment -- Doris Margolis, the president of Editorial Associates and a member of the speakers committee, and Doris is sitting in for Marylou Donahue, a member of the committee who arranged today's luncheon. And Marylou is in the hospital and doing well. We send her our best wishes. After Doris, Harold Holzer, senior vice president for external affairs of the Metropolitan Museum; Allison Bethel, Washington bureau chief for The Detroit News and a member of the press club's Board of Governors; Rod Kuckro, chief editor for Platts McGraw-Hill; Mike Doyle of McClatchy, co-chair of the club's newsmakers committee; and Greg Pierce, who writes the "Inside Politics" column and edits the weekly "Civil War" page for The Washington Times. (Applause.)

Last week, the Mets came to town. Today, we have the head of the Met -- the Metropolitan Museum of Art that is. Philippe de Montebello has headed the world famous museum in New York City for almost 30 years. The New York Times says that's probably the longest-ever tenure by any major museum director. In fact, except for four and a half years in Houston, Texas, Mr. de Montebello has spent his entire career at the Met.

The Metropolitan Museum was founded in 1870 by a group of American citizens who wanted to bring art and art education to the public. It moved to its current location at Central Park in 1880 and has been expanding ever since.

In February, Mr. de Montebello announced the return of almost two dozen classical antiquities to Italy, responding to allegations by the Italian government that the pieces had been illegally taken. Some archaeologists are fighting museums over their question of antiquities saying such objects should remain in their original countries. Such arguments have curbed the ability of museums such as the Met to buy antiquities. As Mr. de Montebello lamented in February, "We buy almost nothing anymore."

Mr. de Montebello was born in Paris and fled the Nazis with his father who was in the resistance. He came to the United States as a teenager and became an American citizen in 1955. He is a graduate of Harvard University and New York University. In 2003 President Bush awarded Mr.

de Montebello the National Medal of the Arts. The president said Mr. de Montebello, and I'm quoting now, "helped preserve, protect and present the cultural and artistic heritage of our world."

Let's welcome Mr. de Montebello to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you, Mr. Salant, and it's a very great pleasure to be here again at the National Press Club.

And good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My last appearance was in 1998.

The day was July 14th -- you picked Bastille Day. Today I think you're all waiting for your Pulitzer Prizes and I do know it is tax deadline day. It is also, I gather by the traffic at least this morning, D.C. Emancipation Day.

The last time I was here, I spoke about Nazi looted art and discussed the guidelines issued by the AAMD -- that is our association, the Association of Art Museum Directors -- and a great deal of progress has been made since then.

Today, as you've heard from Mr. Salant, I'm here to speak once again about a legal issue, and this time it concerns antiquities, their status as cultural patrimony and cultural property -- the two things are not the same. I have to confess to you that some day I really would like to be standing at this podium to speak about things aesthetic, to speak about enlightenment and wonder, but clearly, that doesn't yield hard news.

Today I shall review very briefly the Metropolitan Museum's recent agreement with the Italian government, by which we returned and are about to return a number of disputed antiquities, notably the famous sixth century B.C. krater by the Greek painter Euphronios, several pieces of Hellenistic silver that are said to have been found in Morgantina in Sicily, as well as four other Greek and south Italian vases.

More importantly, however, what I would like to do today is to spend a bit of time on the broader context on issues that made the agreement happen and provide a little bit of philosophy. I may pose in the process a number of questions, rhetorically, to anticipate in a sense and prepare the ground for yours, as I expect that not all of you are necessarily fully briefed on all of the aspects of the issue. And you may wonder, for example, about the reason for its being surrounded by so much controversy, why there should be so much disagreement as well -- even acrimony at times -- between archaeologists -- some archaeologists, at least -- and museums, even though fundamentally the aims of both are essentially the same. We condemn illicit digs and we aim to preserve the world's ancient heritage and the advancement of knowledge.

So why are we at odds -- more at odds even than with the source countries? Source country is the term we use for the countries that through their wealth of antiquities are providers of the works, because in fact the motivations of the source countries, based on increased nationalism, are easier to understand. Archaeologists are and must remain our colleagues. Archaeology is a noble, humanistic profession, and museums collaborate very closely with many of them. Indeed, some

museums -- notably, the Metropolitan -- help sponsor archaeological digs. We have done so for more than a hundred years and we have a number of archaeologists at the Met who actually participate on a number of digs in Egypt, in Syria, in Turkey, and we sponsor them as well.

The dispute between museums and archaeologists has been engendered by the views of a small, rather radical and vocal group -- as we know, moderates tend to be quiet. They believe and proclaim -- I'll expand a little bit more on it later -- that all collecting, especially in the United States, is the reason for so much looting of sites -- it is not; that all objects without a clear pedigree are looted -- they are not. And they condemn not just the looters, as it should be, but the objects themselves, which are called tainted and which almost without exception they will not publish, thereby suppressing valuable knowledge.

These objects, looted or not, with or without a -- (word inaudible) -- their recent ownership history -- are, of course, not only innocent but also valuable testaments to our shared artistic heritage. They are authentic pieces of history and they simply cannot be ignored. Whether legally excavated or not, these objects have intrinsic qualities from which one can learn a great deal.

Under AIA -- that's the Archaeological Institute of America -- rules, by the way, the Gnostic Judas Scrolls could never have been published, nor the Dead Sea Scrolls for that matter. Their belief is that all such objects have almost no value once they have left their burial sites. Fortunately, some senior members of the archaeological community are beginning to express their frustration and even opposition to such a highly politicized agenda. Junior members tend to be more circumspect as the radical archaeologists happen to run their professional association, the Archaeological Institute of America.

Now, you must believe me when I say I have no personal animus towards these ladies and gentlemen. Therefore, it is essential that the AIA leadership and the collecting museums enter into a civil and reasoned discourse to resolve these absurd differences.

As the title of my talk indicates, the issues of who owns culture and whether culture can even be owned is a much-debated topic. How do you define stolen when what is at stake most of the time are fragments of ancient pottery or coins and such in the ground, often on private property and found and sold by the owners of that property -- usually farmers. As it happens, foreign cultural property laws and recent legal opinions in the United States now define more clearly what is meant by stolen. Whether these laws or opinions reflect or counter the prevalent philosophy about cultural heritage, the thinking is of academic interest and not material or even pertinent in the application of a museum's professional practices. There is, simply, laws must be obeyed.

The question often asked and that we will undoubtedly hear in more detail on May 4th at a major forum on museums and collecting of antiquities that will be held at the New York Public Library and organized by the AAMD -- that question is are the inhabitants of modern states, some less than a hundred years old, the natural and legal heirs of 5,000-year-old cultures whose physical remains are found in and within their borders? What are we to make of Iraq National Museum director Donny George's statement recently that, I quote, "ancient Babylonians are Iraqis." Who are Iraqis -- Shi'ites, Sunnis, Kurds -- yet, they are all third and second millennium Babylonians?

Now as a result of returning Greek vases to Italy, I am often asked -- so don't bother -- are today's Florentines direct heirs of the Etruscans who imported Greek vases to ancient Etruria 2,500 years ago? This notion of heritage is now common, albeit not easy to corroborate scientifically, but it reflects a ubiquitous and, frankly, understandable desire on the part of many nations to establish a sense of identity and of roots and to hold onto them. But if you and your children can visit museums in your community and see other (then- ?) American art, see the full span of the world's civilizations, it is because that art has always been a movable feast and because art has forever been sought, carried from one place to another. Think of the silk roads across Central Asia or the way to Western Europe. Think of the huge trading roads of antiquity, Greek vases found in Etruria in modern Tuscany. A Ghandaran ivory was found -- Ghandara in Pakistan, Afghanistan -- a Ghandaran ivory was found in Pompeii. That's far away.

Now here, for example, is a very good example of where archaeology makes such a huge contribution, because if it had come on the market, had not been found at Pompeii, people would have easily said well yes, it's Ghandaran; it comes from Pakistan or from Afghanistan, and never would it have made the link that it might have traveled all the way in antiquity to Pompeii. There are Roman sculptures and artifacts found throughout the Mediterranean Basin, from Turkey to the Dalmatian Coast, North Africa, Italy, Sicily, England, Gaul, which is why very often when people say well, you must return things or you must go to the source and country of origin. Well, which is the country of origin? In many instances, there are many candidates for countries of origin. Art is never free of outside influences. There is no pure culture, which is why so much more can be learned when it is not seen in isolation but in a setting where civilizations can be studied comparatively, one in function of the other, and that is done optimally and, in a sense, exclusively in art museums.

I will return to some of these points in a moment, as I know they need some clarification, and I trust you'll give me a chance to expand on some in your questions. But first, a word about how did all these works of art from the world over get to the museums in the first place. I'll be very brief.

From time immemorial, long before the advent of archaeology which is a phenomena of the 19th and early 20th century and then on, there were, of course, no proper digs. Every work of art in the world's collections ended up in museums as a result of a number of things -- purchases -- outright purchases -- plunder, tribute, or generally war booty. The value of the development of art through the ages of these distinctly free market methods is immensely useful and it is uncontested. The Torso Belvedere in the Vatican, for example, obviously has no archaeological pedigree, but it gave us Michaelangelo. Roman sarcophagi, also unexcavated formally, gave us Mantegna's great painted cycle at Hampton Court, the triumph of the Caesars.

Art-rich nations have always fed the merely rich nations. The Romans transferred thousands of Greek objects and sculptures to their temples and villas. In the 16th century, think of Charles I and his massive acquisitions of hundreds of paintings from the Gonzaga collection in Mantua. Interest in antiquities never ebbed, but in the 18th century with the advent of the Grand Tour -- as you know when mostly English gentlemen with big houses to fill go to Italy to Greece and elsewhere -- knowledge was also advanced because of antiquarian societies. We are after all in

the age of Enlightenment -- I'm talking of the 18th century, of the Encyclopedie of Diderot of which in fact museums are the physical manifestation through their galleries.

Again, before archaeology as we know it today, there was great interest in the ancient world. It was displayed by men such as Vivant Denon, who was the first and really the founder of Egyptology accompanying Napoleon in his campaigns in Egypt. You had in the Middle East the quest for as many tangible vestiges of the Bible as could be found, so French archaeologist Botar (ph), the Englishman Leoard (ph) brought back quite a number of pieces from Assyria and Mesopotamia, filled the Louvre, the British Museum -- also archaeologists from Germany with works brought to the great Berlin museums.

Later in the early 20th century, there are joint excavations and what we call bactage (sp), which is the division of finds between the local department and -- antiquity and the digging entity. Bactage (sp) yielded some of the great works in all of our museums including, for example, most of the exhibition -- most of the works in the exhibition now at the Met about the first queen of Egypt, Pharaoh Hatshepsut. Those were the result of joint digs early in the century in Egypt. The method and the practice of bactage (sp) came to an end around World War II. The irony is that in the icily cold light of retrospective examination, by today's standards, technically some would say that all objects obtained outside of the methodology of bactage (sp) are by definition illicit.

Opponents to the purchase of objects with uncertain -- (word inaudible) -- demand that no object be purchased that does not have a proper export permit, but then no major source country grants export permits.

Without doubt, one way to reduce the continuing scourge of clandestine digs is for the source countries to create a licit market. They're not short of the material. The Japanese model, incidentally, is an excellent and proven one whereby some objects are declared national treasures, others -- and they have lists and they study them with their committees -- declared redundant. The objects are held in many of their museums well represented and they may be sold and exported with a permit. There is no looting in Japan.

In the process I've described -- cruelly abbreviated, I recognize -- we have gone from centuries where there was no local interest in the antiquities being dug up in the days in which we've -- (inaudible) -- and others were taking objects for the museum; the locals were basically quarrying the pyramids and other monuments to build buildings in their cities. We have gone from there to the movement of independence from colonialism, a time of great awareness on the ancient past and the local history. Hence, the requirement then to share the finds with those who dug all the way to what we have now, which is an era of pronounced nationalism and a moment when a great many laws are passed declaring all antiquities found within a nation borders to be state property and the interdiction of an export market.

And more recently, we have seen international treaties designed to help protect ancient sites, such as the UNESCO Convention, which was passed in 1970, ratified by the United States in 1983. And in the U.S. recently, judicial opinions have now ruled that under the National Stolen Property Act, foreign patrimony laws could be the standard to determine that objects removed from their source country were indeed stolen.

I've rushed through all of this simply to give you some context to Italy's claims against various museums, including the Metropolitan, and our negotiations, which we conducted, with an eye both to the legal and the ethical sides of the issue. For example, we could have invoked a statute of limitations, which we believe had -- and the Italians, incidentally, acknowledged -- expired for the two important items: the Euphronios Krater and the Hellenistic silver. We chose not to. We wanted to be totally aboveboard and irreproachable, not only legally but collegially, vis-a-vis our Italian friends and colleagues -- though also, as I mentioned earlier, for minor Italian and south Italian vases that are being returned as well.

Once we learned, directly from the Italian judiciary and cultural ministry, what the carabinieri, the state police, had uncovered in their raids of warehouses in Switzerland in the mid-1990s, and once we were shown the evidentiary documents made public during the criminal trial -- that's been a bit in the press -- in the course of our negotiations in Rome, we came to the conclusion that the weight of evidence pointed to illicit activity and that we should seek to make things right.

What we saw seemed to indicate that there was extensive scheming among a network of dealers - - major dealers -- with tomb robbers, active primarily in Tuscany and in Sicily. They flourished largely in unguarded sites and often in league with local police. They also took advantage of a climate of, shall we call it *laissez faire* in the museum world -- a certain indifference to cultural property issues. Remember, every moment in time has its own culture, its own norms, its own *modus operandi*.

In this case, I would say the lack of scrutiny of recent provenance for proposed purchases was partially the result of a philosophical position that questioned the very notion that modern states are necessarily the rightful owners of objects from a distant past on their territory. And that questioned the premise that all objects from one part of the world must remain in that part of the world.

The dealers involved also capitalized on the natural eagerness of museums to build up their collections so as to present the best possible, tangible history of art of a broad public in fulfillment of the museums' mission, which is to preserve, publish and make works of art widely accessible.

I think it also needs to be said that most staff at museums around the world, acquiring works with doubtful provenances in those days, unlike what has been occasionally represented, display not cupidity but, rather, guilelessness, if you will, in the face of very clever imposture and deception. If the looting and deception is as extensive as I believe it is, or was, then it is nothing short of an outrage, and there isn't a person in the field, whether museum curator or director or many of the collectors that I know, who would not strongly condemn it.

Purchases by museums during this period -- we're talking about some three decades -- is only partially excused by the knowledge that only some of the objects offered without clear provenance were looted -- not all. Many surfaced as the result of trans-finds. The distinction is not always made. Some came from large public works, construction projects where you dig up an object. The last thing you want is to show it to an archeologist or you lose millions because

they stop your project. And so that is what the middlemen do, and then it gets into a black market. Others are also the result of natural disasters. There is nothing like earthquakes and mudslides to bring to the surface Hellenistic earrings and gold. Others came from old and not so old collections. By and large, the collectors and collections are not well documented and a great many collectors wish to retain a certain anonymity.

From the vantage point of American museums in current and future acquisitions, though, this is essentially a closed factor. And I'm not talking about the matter of claims and returns. Those will be dealt with, as we've already said and demonstrated, by studying the evidence and taking appropriate action. Nor do I mean that looting has stopped; unfortunately, it continues unabated all over the world. It is just the United States is no longer a factor, nor has it been for some time, in promoting looting through the purchase of recently excavated pieces.

The bulk of the market has some time ago been redirected elsewhere. And ironically, mostly underground where the objects will not be seen, will not be studied and will not be found by potentially claimant nations, as if -- whereas in museums, they are brought out into the open.

It is simply a fact that the restrictive guidelines implemented over the past few years -- notably by the AAMD, our association -- have contributed to the markedly diminished supply in the U.S. of unprovenance antiquities -- a fact also that acquisitions of antiquities are now but a fraction of what they once were. The statistics are there to prove them. I can give them to you any time you want. And on a global scale, quite simply, these acquisitions here are inconsequential, representing, as they do, less than 1 percent of the estimated market in antiquities.

With regard to the Italian agreement, I must state further that I am grateful for Italy's willingness to accept a framework based on the principle of reciprocity and compensation through like material. The words in the agreement are of equivalent importance and beauty -- and this out of the Italians' recognition that the Met had purchased the pieces in good faith. I'm grateful for the willingness that they expressed to send objects in exchange -- was also tacit acknowledgment on their part of the value of the universal museum -- that is one with encyclopedic collections -- and their desire to continue to make antiquities found on their soil available to our visitors.

I must say, I am puzzled at one thing, which is the absence of claims against collectors and museums in Germany, the U.K., Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Japan, among others. They were buying at least as much from the dealers now under indictment as the United States. And I think we should reflect on why only the U.S. is being targeted at the moment for claims.

I've mentioned the tacit Italian acknowledgment of the universal museum -- as I said, another term for encyclopedic. It describes institutes whose collections are diverse and multifaceted, presenting many of the world's multiple cultures and civilizations. And that allows for the invaluable -- and this is an important point -- comparative and cross-cultural approach to objects that are preserved and displayed under one - or in the case in Berlin, adjoining roofs, so that the key differences and similarities between these objects are clearly apprehended.

Objects that can only be studied in the country or locality of origin, in direct proximity only to objects, like objects, yield much valuable information and they can be studied in great depth, but

such study tends before us to be narrowly circumscribed. The universal museum, on the other hand, is the cultural family tree where all people can find their roots, where these may be studied according to their key interconnections in close proximity to other cultures.

Characteristic among the universal museums, by the way -- the Louvre, the British Museum, the cluster of Berlin museums, the Metropolitan, the MFA in Boston, Chicago's Art Institute, and so forth -- and their contents are the basic material of the basic textbooks of art history.

I should add another thing, which to me is very important about universal museum, which is it gives you the ability to study and to see so many cultures that it promotes certain humility, it promotes tolerance -- tolerance through the recognition that one's own is not the only or best culture, necessarily, but that it existed and exists alongside other great civilizations. And that is a very important message.

Let me end on a very brief outline of the overall controversy and where museums go from here. I hope many questions will expand this. First of all, we live in the world of today, museums and source countries alike. We live according to the norms and attitudes of one's time. So today, as with yesterday, museums and collectors among them must act responsibly and within the law and according to the norms of the day. We have done this increasingly.

It surprises me that so many members of the press -- and I do not mean to be disobliging to my hosts -- but it does seem -- though it is gradually changing, I've noticed -- that some do appear to be captive to the thoughts and repeated quotes of a small group of radical archeologists, which I've (already ?) referred, who do not represent the majority in the profession -- men and women who are in fact -- the others -- embarrassed by their peers' agenda and the stridency of the current discourse.

There should be as well more skepticism in questioning on the part of the press on the arguments put forward by all sides. Unfortunately, pronouncements, as you know, are too often taken at face value. And when that happens they become, after awhile, fact, including exaggerations. In fact, investigative reporters especially should continue to show the same skepticism towards what museum spokespeople say.

This does not concern me. Our views can withstand the sharpest scrutiny. And I believe we hold the high moral ground. We have no other agenda but to be true to our mission of education and enlightenment. We too want to protect sites and work toward eliminating the black market in antiquities. But we want to target the cause, not be sidetracked by ideology.

First, we need to debunk a number of fanciful claims. You read it constantly. Billions of dollars a year are spent yearly on looted antiquities. Four billion (dollars), 4.5 billion (dollars) is what one reads often. Four billion dollars, I remind you, is 100 times \$100 million. A survey done in the late 1990s indicated that the totality of sales of antiquities at Sotheby's and Christie's was about \$90 million. Between that and 4 billion (dollars), there seems to be a big chasm.

Iraq: The market is flooded with looted pieces. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm not naive, nor are many curators or those of museums. We have not seen a single antiquity from Iraq surface from

any dealer, nor have I met any dealer who has offered any to United States museums. As I said before, there is a market. There probably is because there's wide-scale looting in that country, but it is being -- the outlet is not in the United States.

Another thing that is often said -- all buying by American museums promotes more looting of sites. I'm not going to repeat -- again, I've indicated that that simply is not the case. As far as the Metropolitan Museum is concerned, I did a study of the last 10 years of acquisitions of provenance -- of antiquities that did not have the provenance that went back beyond the UNESCO convention of 1970 -- and we spent about \$150 to \$150,000 a year. Now, that is great incentive to wide-scale billion-dollar looting.

The find spot - I've explained to you what that was -- the find spot where obviously the archeological comes out of the ground -- is the all-important context of antiquities, is what we are told. Well, first of all, what it is is the last and final context of the work of art.

Most works of arts, most antiquities, did not originate in the ground. They were made to be used; they moved around; they traveled and so forth. There are any number of layers of meaning that works of art have; and often to study them comparatively in relation to other works of art is also important. I'll bring simply the example of the great Stele of Naram-Sin in the Louvre, which was discovered by French archeologists in Susa, in current-day Iran, in an Elamite area. It happens that those objects actually were looted in the second millennium B.C. from Babylon in Iraq. What is the country of origin? Where do they come from?

Another example is a bronze lion in the Louvre with a Hurrian inscription. And that is the object that gave archeologists from UCLA the clue that this fabled civilization, the fabled city of Urkesh - I know you hadn't all heard about it; I hadn't either before -- but from these objects held by the Louvre and the Metropolitan, they were able to go back to Tell Mozan near Tell Brak in northern Syria, dig and find the city of Hurrian. So the notion that an antiquity that has been alienated from its context is of little or no value, frankly, is not correct.

Objects must remain at or near their find spots to be seen in context -- I've already indicated the problems and the limitations of an object seen in isolation. And then finally, one reads everywhere, every object that is on the market that has no provenance is looted. I think I've already alluded to trans-finds, to building, to this that or the other, and I don't have to repeat it.

Such categorical claims, as those I've just attempted to refute, are made, as I said before, by a small group of archeologists at the helm of the AIA -- those who are so frequently quoted. And I must say, as we begin in museums to have a healthy and constructive dialogue with many source nations, it seems all the more absurd that there should be such division between museums and the archeological community, when ultimately we have the same goals.

So I would like to take this opportunity to invite -- and I say this publicly today for the first time -- I invite the leadership of the AIA to engage with museums in a civil discourse, in good faith, in an open dialogue to resolve our differences. We should do so for the benefits of the world's cultural and artistic heritage, more likely to be preserved if we have a united agenda, and with the enhancement of knowledge.

I should mention additionally -- and I'm about done -- that among the most important steps museums have taken in recent years to help discourage the looting of sites, is the issuance of the AAMD's report on Acquisitions of Archeological Materials of an Ancient Art, issued in 2004. These are guidelines adopted by members of this association that constitute the policy for the acquisition of antiquities. They call for all of the things that you expect if you want to adhere to the law, such as stringent due diligence. But they also call for -- in the case of exceptional objects for the permission to buy them if they've been out of the ground for at least, and demonstrably, for at least 10 years, so that you do not incentivize -- I don't know if that's in the OED -- looters.

And the guidelines, of course, further commit museums to consider claims fairly, as they are now doing. Now, some archeologists have criticized this provision of the 10-year rule as constituting a loophole to continue to collect objects without prognose (sp). Now, I answer, this is not a loophole. It is a fail-safe. It is a safeguard to ensure that objects that are precise testaments to our past are not lost forever and can be appreciated, studied, brought into the public domain where they belong and where, I've already said, a potential claimant nation has a chance to find them.

That, ladies and gentlemen, as far as I'm concerned, is the high moral ground, not the discarding of objects for ideological reasons. To use the date of 1970, which has also been suggested -- that's the UNESCO convention -- and as the U.K. and German museums have done -- frankly, to my great disappointment -- that is not the high moral ground. That is a capitulation to a political agenda and a betrayal of a museum's basic mission and purpose -- in this case, the rescue and the preservation of objects of great aesthetic merit and intrinsic cultural significance.

To simply and deliberately condemn innumerable worthy objects, which they must be -- we're talking 35 years, back to 1970 -- objects already alienated from their context in the ground to the trash heap or to oblivion. So redirecting the market to a true black market, to buyers less committed to openness, conservation, scholarship and certainly access is wrong. Refusal to acquire an important antiquity merely because it cannot be traced beyond, say, an auction in the mid- 1970s -- who does it benefit? No one, as it will remain unknown, unpublished, inaccessible. And I assure you, there will be no providential wind to carry it aloft its hole in the ground.

As archeologists have said, these unprovenance objects are orphans, as their parentage through the absence of a known find spot is lost. But would these same archeologists abandon an orphaned child on a cold rainy day in the street or would they look for an orphanage? We museums are the orphanage of these objects. Nor can I stress enough that museums do not horde. They bring the works they acquire into the public domain. We display them. We publish them electronically as well as on paper.

So to those who say do not buy an unprovanaced object, no matter how unique, brilliantly conceived and masterfully crafted it is, I would again ask, and what do you propose should be done with that object? Of course, it is to be deplored that works of ancient art are removed clandestinely from their site. Much knowledge is lost as a result, but we should not compound that loss by helping the work of art to disappear. That would be a violation of our *raison d'etre*.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: There are a lot of questions already.

Let me begin with this one: You posed the question of why the U.S. alone is being targeted for claims and not European countries and other countries overseas. Why do you think that is?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I posed the question, and my intent was not to answer it. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: Since you were so nice to the Italians today in your speech, why did you recently call the Italians shabby in the way they handled the process leading to negotiations over the antiquities?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I was accurately quoted, but it is not the Italians I called shabby. It is their process. And it was shabby -- not withstanding how magnanimous they were in reaching the agreement -- in the fact that at no point in the seven-year history since the prosecution of Giacomo Medici and others did they ever, ever write us a single letter, a single note indicating what objects were claimed.

Everything we learned that led to my calling the Ministry of Culture in Italy in order to see if we could resolve our differences I learned, ladies and gentlemen, from you, entirely in the press. In fact, less than a month ago we received a letter offering the first set of objects in exchange. We had received the day before a phone call from the press asking us what we thought of that offer. It had gone to the press before it had gone to us.

That's the methodology that I called shabby. I think it is shabby.

MR. SALANT: How are other museum directors reacting to the agreement with Italy?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I think overall there's a sense of accomplishment, a turning point in the road. And I wouldn't be surprised -- I don't want to speak on behalf of my colleagues -- if a number of them who were in the same position would not seek the same sort of arrangements whereby their own publics would not be -- especially important for the smaller museums where the loss of an object is all the more important to the overall collection -- but not be compensated by like objects.

But I would say from what my colleagues have said that they think this is a very good and fair agreement.

MR. SALANT: How well or poorly have those counterparts in charge of other famous museums around the world duplicated your willingness to negotiate the return of objects illicitly obtained to their former owners?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: What I know I know in the press from one or two conversations. And I think we've read recently about the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and others requesting interviews with the Italian authorities.

The Greek nation is also seeking some returns. And I would say on the whole I would be very surprised if any of my colleagues were not receptive and did not act in a responsible way.

But I can't speak altogether for them. This is an anecdotal sense of things.

MR. SALANT: Do you think there should be a rule applied to (retroceding ?) or giving back items in collections to others? For example, two people ask, do you believe that the British Museum should give back the Elgin Marbles to Greece? (Laughter.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I have to tell you, I don't believe in rewriting history. I think firmly that at some point a date beyond which one goes becomes an absurdity. The Elgin Marbles were taken and granted to the British by the Ottoman rule in Greece in the early 19th century. What about the horses of San Marco, which were taken by Doge Enrico Dandolo in 1204 in the campaigns in Constantinople? And how far back are you going to go? Should Iraq have a dispute with Iran and then ultimately with the Louvre over the objects from Susa, originally from Babylon? Where do you start? Where do you go?

Rewriting history to me makes very little sense. And the difficulty lies in where do you draw that line -- difficult because a number of nations have passed in different years -- it's 1939 during the Mussolini era in Italy that the patrimony laws were passed. But they were passed at many different moments -- some later, some earlier, by different countries.

And if the law decrees for example in this country that a patrimonial law applies and makes an object stolen, then where you draw the line I think has to be in a kind of an international conference where the majority of source countries and the majority of the acquiring institutions agree on that line.

MR. SALANT: Generally has the trade in antiquities, whether or not a legal trade, led to protection rather than the destruction of such pieces?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, this is the great paradox. It's very difficult for me to stand here and basically to debunk mother and apple pie. But the truth is that without a black market, as I've indicated with building projects, a great number of objects would be lost.

It is because there is a black market, for example, that a lot of gold and silver, very precious objects, beautiful shapes -- rhytons from Iran, vessels and filee (sp) from the classical world -- instead of being melted down by the peasant or whoever finds it on his property, for the nominal value of the metal, will now realize that as a rhyton -- it's a drinking vessel in the shape of a horn -- is worth a great deal more. And so it goes to middle men; middle men -- excuse me, middle people -- send it over to the market, and ultimately to museums.

So yes, on the one hand it is an incentive obviously to illicit actions. But on the other there is no question that it has had its value in preserving works of art.

I think that another aspect that should be spoken about at the future at major conferences would have to be countries of origin, source nations, perhaps with the help -- depending on which ones

they are of the outside -- of far better protection of their sites and the creation of a licit market. There is no reason why a great many of these nations whose storerooms are engorged with works of art cannot create lists and, since they own them, render them not inalienable but, rather, available for a licit market. This would reduce the prices, diminish incentives for looters, and frankly, all the way around, be a far more reasonable approach.

All of this is something that will take time, but I think with conversations, civil discourse, this may be possible.

MR. SALANT: When you say that the looted objects of art are not now coming to the United States, where are they going?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Elsewhere. (Laughter.) I take what ever amendment is appropriate here. (Laughter). I have some pretty good idea where they're going. My friends in the archeological community have a pretty good idea of where they're going. And I think I'll leave it at that. This is not a time when criminal prosecution occurs when one has friends around the world to point the finger. But they're not coming here. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: Ancient artifacts are on sale on eBay. Should this practice be allowed to continue?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Caveat emptor. (Laughter.) You mean antiquities?

MR. SALANT: Within the United States, haven't policies governing Native American artifacts (is question of rights ?) harmed museums, science, and the study of American Indian history?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: I can't answer the question. I run a museum that has practically no American Indian or Native American art. This is -- we haven't collected in that field really, principally because the Heye Foundation, of which half is now here in Washington, was so rich in that material that the Met didn't feel it should duplicate. Therefore, I am not up on -- (inaudible) -- I think it's called -- those laws, because they don't affect me on a pragmatic basis every day. So I'm sorry, I pass.

MR. SALANT: Can you comment on the theft of pieces of Angkor Wat in Cambodia? Was this justified making Angkor familiar to Westerners who are unable to travel to Cambodia or not?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Well, that's a nasty question. (Laughter.) We have not spoken -- I have not spoken of a whole different issue, which is the dismemberment of actual monuments. And there, this is a very different thing from finding pieces of the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves.

I think there is no justification for tearing down great monuments. Yes, there has been the corollary effect that by being able to see Khmer art of Cambodia in the Musee Guimet, at the Met, and a great many museums around the world, that has obviously encouraged people to go to the site.

But even that -- even I would never, never condone the destruction of any monument. And the sad thing is, that it's a very cultivated man who is minister of Culture of France, by the name of Andre Malraux, who was responsible in the early days for -- as you know, this was a French colony -- for removing so many of the heads and limbs from the statues there.

So you see me highly conflicted on that issue.

MR. SALANT: What is your proposed view of the proposed ban -- or what is your view on the proposed ban of imports from China?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The issue of the proposed ban of the import from China under the -- what is called, Sharon?

MS. : (Off mike.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The Cultural Property Implementation Act is a real problem. I think it is a political issue, and one that is wrongheaded.

To explain briefly to you what it is, a number of nations -- Italy was one a few years ago; Canada a few years ago -- have asked in order to, quote-unquote, "protect" their archeological sites and their antiquities that the United States pass a uniform ban on the import into this country of any of their archeological goods -- (inaudible) -- now, for example, as I said before, for Italy. I won't comment on that; I was asked about China.

As far as China is concerned, to tell you the truth, we now know that something like 85 to 90 percent of the market for Chinese antiquities is in China itself. The new rich in Shanghai and Beijing and elsewhere are buying left and right. The incidence of purchases in this country is minuscule, and I think any ban on the import of Chinese antiquities, were it to take place, would have to be described as a self-denegating ban with Americans through their own government and State Department depriving their own citizens of the ability to study the art of ancient China. And it would have no effect whatsoever on the millions of sites that exist in China. Think of how many China has destroyed through the construction of the dam over the river -- thousands and thousands.

MR. SALANT: Considering your important contribution to the efforts to restore to Holocaust victims works of art that were looted by the Nazis, can you comment, please, on whether there are still unaccounted works of art which were stolen from their owners during World War II and which still remain to be returned to their rightful owners?

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: As I said in 1998 appeared here, this was also a moment where huge exaggerations that gave very wrong and high expectations to people were made. I remember standing in this room, and in another room in Congress, answering questions about the tens of thousands of potentially -- of paintings in the United States that had been looted, spoliated by the Nazis during the war. And I indicated that I felt those numbers were not only misleading, they were cruelly misleading, for the simple reason -- and I gave the following statistic, that the Metropolitan Museum of Art has the largest collection of paintings in the United States, and our

collection totals 2,400 pictures. Out of those 2,400 pictures, more than half were acquired before World War I, and more than half of the rest, or more than two-thirds of the rest, cannot possibly - - because the history is known -- have been in any way spoliated at the time.

So the magnitude of the problem from the start has been enormously exaggerated. Of course, one work taken during this unspeakable period is one too many, as we know, which is why the AAMD passed its guidelines. We should look at every claim, not in terms of legalities but in terms of, in this case, not even ethics but morality.

I think we read occasionally of a few high-profile cases. Since the late '90s, which is when the movement began in earnest, you can count on the fingers of two hands the number of claims, unfortunately -- obviously, a lot of the heirs are no longer alive. Their children and grandchildren have almost no documentation, and these are very, very difficult cases to put forward.

You must also remember that in the period immediately following the war -- '47, '48 -- more than 90 percent of all of the works that had been taken were returned at the time to the heirs. So we are still talking even then the very small number of people, and of really increasingly diminishing returns.

There is no question you see more claims. There are more claims. You can go and see five Schieles in Los Angeles County Museum of Art now, but I don't think it will be highly significant.

One would wish that one could return whatever was spoliated, but I think the reality is a bit different.

MR. SALANT: Before we ask our last question, I would like to present you with the official coveted National Press Club coffee mug -- (laughter) --

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you very much.

MR. SALANT: -- suitable for sipping beverage when you're looking over the latest addition to your collection -- (laughter) -- and a certificate of appreciation.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: A final question; I've gotten a couple in: What is your favorite art museum in Washington and why? (Laughter and groans.)

MR. DE MONTEBELLO: The wonderful thing about coming to Washington is the multiplicity of experiences one encounters here. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. SALANT: I'd like to thank you for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze, and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. And thank to the National Press Club's Eric Friedheim Library for its research.

Happy Easter and Happy Passover. We're adjourned. (Applause.)

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