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Conference at the American Academy in Rome illuminated the changing climate for Cleveland Museum of Art and other institutions that collect antiquities

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By **Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer**
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Rome -- The images of ancient Roman mosaics found and preserved recently in south-central Turkey were stunning.

Unfortunately, they flashed across the screen in a darkened auditorium at the **American Academy in Rome** too quickly. One had the impulse to shout at the lecturer, "Slow down!"

But the two-day symposium last month on "Saving Cultural Heritage in Crisis Areas" was running late, and Italian archaeologist **Roberto Nardi** had a lot of ground to cover in his dramatic tale of rescuing the mosaics from the rising waters of a lake created by the Birecik hydroelectric dam along the Euphrates River.



[View full size](#) Roberto Nardi
"Gypsy Girl," an ancient Roman mosaic, has become the symbol of treasures rescued from the rising waters of a manmade lake in south central Turkey and now displayed nearby at a museum in Gaziantep. Earlier looting at the original site damaged the piece.

The American Academy conference - part of which I attended during a recent trip to Italy - showed how cultural treasures around the world are threatened by war, natural disasters, infrastructure projects such as the dam in Turkey, and the looting of sites around the world.

The conference also illuminated the evolving moral and political climate affecting art museums that buy antiquities, including the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Archaeologists have long held that museums tacitly encourage looting when they buy antiquities on the art market or accept gifts from collectors. In addition to being a crime, looting destroys the physical context in which the objects are found and obscures a good part of their meaning.

Many museums, on the other hand, insist that antiquities offered for sale on the market belong in



public collections where they can be studied and appreciated, absent clear evidence that their purchase violates international laws and agreements, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention aimed at halting illegal traffic in antiquities.

One such recent purchase was the Cleveland museum's Apollo Sauroktonos bronze, which it believes is likely to be an ancient Greek original by Praxiteles. Archaeologists around the world have criticized the purchase because of gray areas in its ownership history, or provenance. The museum has agreed to continue researching the work with experts from Italy, which has raised questions about the sculpture.

"For a long time, our communities were fighting each other nonstop and not making any progress," said archaeologist **Brian Rose**, who co-organized the conference in Rome.

Rose, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, a past president of the Archaeological Institute of America and a trustee of the American Academy in Rome, said he has helped to form an informal working group of museum directors and archaeologists who are trying to find common ground.

The group includes, among others, Maxwell Anderson, the newly appointed director of the Dallas Museum of Art; Dan Monroe, director of the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts; and Susan Taylor, director of the New Orleans Museum of Art, all members of the Association of Art Museum Directors.

Also participating are Elizabeth Bartman, president of the Archaeological Institute of America; Claire Lyons, curator of antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles; and Rosemary Joyce, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Nevertheless, Rose said he felt the era in which American museums can collect antiquities is coming to a close.

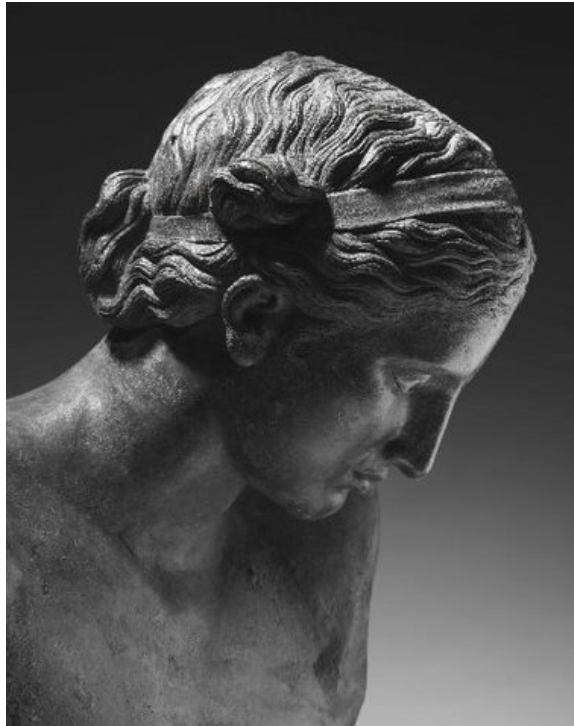
Source countries are becoming more aggressive in pursuing traffickers and enforcing laws against looting, he said.

Proof is easy to find in Rome. For example, a display case at the **Villa Giulia** includes 21 Etruscan objects recently restituted to Italy by American museums, including Cleveland's.

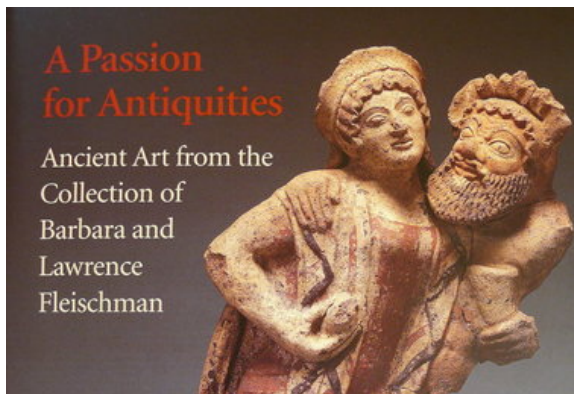
Buying antiquities could alienate foreign governments and prevent the cooperation necessary for international loans of individual objects or traveling exhibitions, Rose said.

"You'll end up in litigation, and you won't be able to enter into collaborative projects," he said. "It's all about collaboration now."

Rather than collect, museums ought to forge agreements with source countries



[View full size](#) Cleveland Museum of Art
The Cleveland Museum of Art's purchase of the Apollo Sauroktonos bronze in 2004 raised the ire of archaeologists because the work's provenance, or ownership history, is unclear.



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to share cultural riches, Rose said.

In response, C. Griffith Mann, the Cleveland museum's chief curator, said last week that the museum would continue to buy antiquities "because we're a collecting institution."

Nevertheless, Mann acknowledged that the "burden of proof is on the museum to do the research to be confident that by collecting, you're preserving art, not supporting an antiquities market that's illicit."

The museum's website does not include information on the provenance of most works in its collection. In the case of antiquities, this makes it impossible for the public to know how much the museum knows about where and when the objects are said to have been found.

Mann said the museum's policies on the issue are under review.

The conference in Rome documented global crises that make it likely that antiquities with unclear ownership histories will continue to tempt museums and pose painful moral questions for art audiences everywhere, including in Cleveland.

Often, traffic in looted cultural treasures parallels trade in illegal drugs, guns and sex slaves, speakers at the conference said.

Advanced technology could help both the thieves and the archaeologists - the offense and the defense. Archaeologists are using satellite photographs to pinpoint illegal excavations. At the same time, looters are gaining access to ever-more-sophisticated gadgets. Rose worries that this could extend to ground-penetrating radar or magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, equipment, which would help them spot where to dig.

Rose, who co-organized the conference with Laurie Rush, an archaeologist for the Army at Fort Drum, N.Y., said he was motivated by the revolutions of the Arab Spring and the threat they pose to world heritage sites. (A video recording of a portion of the conference can be found on the [academy's website](#).)

The conference documented heartbreaking losses, such as the destruction of a historic bridge in the Bosnian city of Mostar in 1992 by Serbian forces and the demolition of the monumental Buddhist statues at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, by the Taliban in 2001.

Speakers also celebrated successes, such as the preservation of the ancient Roman ruins of [Leptis Magna in Libya](#), spared in the recent NATO bombing raids that helped overthrow Moammar Gadhafi.

Rose said that source countries should train soldiers to preserve cultural sites during wars and revolutions, and instill in children a sense of pride in their cultural heritage through educational programs.

Yet he also lamented that it can be hard for countries rich in archaeological sites to police their own territories. In



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Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

The ancient Etruscan "Antefix in the Form of a Maenad and Silenos," once owned by the J. Paul Getty Museum and exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1995, has been restituted by the Getty and is on display in a case at the Villa Giulia in Rome, along with 20 other allegedly looted objects from other U.S. institutions, including the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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Jack Schnedler

Leptis Magna, in Libya, shown in 2005, was spared damage in the recent NATO bombing raids that helped overthrow Muammar

Turkey, it is widely known that thieves use road-building equipment at night to smash open stone chambers in ancient burial mounds, he said.

Gaddan, according to published reports.

"It's very difficult for Turkey, or any country for that matter, to prevent such extensive looting," he said.

Nardi, the archaeologist who led the rescue of the mosaics in Turkey, described another challenge: that of raising the money needed to preserve antiquities.

He said it was clear for years in advance that the rising floodwaters along the Euphrates would inundate a large portion of the ancient Roman garrison town of Zeugma. It wasn't until The New York Times published an article in 2000 that the impending crisis caught the attention of the Packard Humanities Institute in California, which donated \$5 million to save the mosaics.

"You need journalists to wake up public opinion," he said.

Nardi, who heads a private restoration company in Rome called the Centro di Conservazione Archeologica, displayed a video showing how skilled workers peeled mosaics off their ancient foundations and remounted them in sections on lightweight aluminum panels.

The mosaics are now housed in a **\$50 million museum** that opened during the summer in the city of Gaziantep, 50 kilometers away from Zeugma. The city hopes to boost tourism and the local economy on the strength of the mosaics.

The collection includes clear evidence of looting at Zeugma prior to 2000.

Archaeological journals reported in 1999 that mosaic portraits of Metiochos and Parthenope, fictional lovers described as the Romeo and Juliet of the ancient world, surfaced at Rice University in Houston, where they had been loaned by the **Menil Collection**.

The mosaics, later returned to Turkey and restored there by Nardi, fit like puzzle pieces into a mosaic frame retrieved from Zeugma.

It was one more vivid example of how institutions and collectors in the United States, even with the best of intentions, can participate unwittingly in the ongoing destruction of cultural sites around the world.



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Roberto Nardi

"Achilles on Skyros," recovered from Zeugma, is now part of the new mosaic museum in Gaizantep, Turkey.



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Roberto Nardi

"Metiochos and Parthenope" was reassembled in Turkey after authorities discovered that the central portraits had been looted from

Zeugma and had landed in an American collection.

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