

How to ...

Buy antiquities

Take steps to avoid terrorist plunder

In recent months, ancient glass and other artefacts suspected of being looted from parts of Iraq and Syria controlled by Islamic State (Isis) have been discovered for sale in London. Middlemen have peddled larger antiquities on the black market in Turkey and to a global audience using social media.

Kathryn Tully looks at the steps collectors of ancient artefacts can take to ensure they are not breaking the law or stoking the demand for looted treasures.

Industrial-scale pillaging

Looting is hardly new to Iraq or Syria. When Isis occupied large parts of Syria in 2013, its first step was to tax impoverished Syrians already looting there. Items were looted and sold from Palmyra, a world heritage site, for decades before the civil war started, says Mr Al-Azm. “In those days, senior Syrian regime members were implicated in a massive way.”

Yet Isis is today plundering antiquities in Iraq and Syria on what Unesco describes as “an industrial scale”. Isis militants murdered Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Assad, seemingly for trying to protect Palmyra’s remaining treasures, and obliterated the Temple of Baal, its most celebrated building. Those buying antiquities from unscrupulous sellers may be funding terrorism, human trafficking, torture, mass murder and the unprecedented destruction of Syria and Iraq’s cultural heritage.

Recent reports have suggested Isis makes anything from several million to several billion dollars from this trade, but Mr Al-Azm says it is impossible to know its true value. “What we can say with some confidence is that it’s a lucrative trade, because Isis is now buying heavy machinery to excavate sites and paying wages to looters and intermediaries who sell these artefacts. If they were making a loss, they would stop.”

Tight restrictions

The legal antiquities market is very restricted. Selling works from recent excavations is prohibited, so there is a finite supply of pieces that can be traded legally because they were in circulation before the introduction of cultural patrimony laws in their countries of origin.

The 1970 Unesco convention bans the sale of looted antiquities, and in February the UN Security Council adopted a resolution threatening sanctions against countries that allow terrorist groups to profit from looted Syrian and Iraqi treasures. Many countries also have their own



Destroyed: the 2,000-year-old Temple of Baal in Palmyra, Syria — Reuters

Crime

Stopping the illegal antiquities trade

While Unesco, the UN Security Council and governments around the world have increased efforts to prevent the trafficking of looted antiquities from Iraq and Syria, Alice Farren-Bradley, director of Claims and Recoveries at Art Recovery International, thinks more collaboration is needed. “It’s easy to say that not enough is being done in the art market, by law enforcement, on the ground, by other agencies, but this is a global problem that requires global co-operation,” she says.

New legislation, such as the Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act, which passed the US House of Representatives in June and is now before the Senate, could help to prosecute both buyers and sellers of looted antiquities — if they are carefully enforced.

“You need both laws and the resources to enforce them,” says Mr Al-Azm. “If only one case in 100 is investigated, it is still worthwhile for smugglers to pursue this.”

legislation that regulates the movement of all antiquities and prevents the import of Syrian and Iraqi antiquities specifically.

Buyers should only purchase through reputable dealers and auction houses, which are tightening policies concerning conflict areas. “Some dealers and auction houses will not handle anything originating from a conflict region, whenever it was removed. Some will only do so if an export licence exists. Others say that for items exported centuries ago, other provenance standards must be met,” says Alice Farren-Bradley, director of Claims and Recoveries at Art Recovery International.

“Make sure the seller is a member of The International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art, Le Confédération Internationale des Négo-ciants en Oeuvres d’Arts or both, ideally,” says Joseph Coplin, co-owner of New York antiquities dealer Antiquarium, which sells to many museums. “Their members have obligations to protect trafficked objects, to the culture they come from, and to their own industry, which they don’t want to see shut down.”

Documentary evidence

Collectors should not buy pieces without a provenance — a history —

and supporting documents. Export and import documents are particularly important. “It’s critical to understand if a piece was legally exported from its country of origin and legally imported where it’s on sale,” says Laura Doyle, a fine art specialist at Chubb Insurance.

Documentation can also include witness statements, photos of antiquities in a family collection or wills, proving a piece was inherited. Antiquities with the very best provenance sell for a premium of up to 100 per cent, says Mr Coplin. That applies to both £100 strings of Egyptian faience beads and the figure of a lioness from ancient Mesopotamia, loaned to the Brooklyn Museum for half a century, which carried an estimate of \$14m to \$18m, but sold for \$57m (£36m) at Sotheby’s in 2007.

Antiquities such as the lioness with a famous provenance, and instantly recognisable items with universal appeal like classical sculpture and sarcophagi, are most likely to provoke a bidding war at auction and sell for multiples of their estimated price.

In contrast, buyers that purchase items without the proper paperwork may never be able to resell them, and could own a looted object, or even a fake. “Half to two-thirds of the

things we see are fakes,” says Mr Al-Azm. “Countries such as Bulgaria are producing fake coins, for example, which are mixed with looted items coming across their borders.”

Documents can also be faked by individuals wishing to launder and sell looted goods on the legal market, says Mr Coplin, so buyers should verify the contents of provenance documents and do their own due diligence on the object. “Collectors should check databases such as the Art Loss Register or Art Recovery International, which track lost and stolen artefacts,” says Ms Doyle.

Online checks

Other resources can help. Unesco, for example, tracks looted sites and the International Council of Museums maintains country-specific “red lists” of cultural objects that are vulnerable to theft or looting. The organisation published its emergency red list for Iraq in June and Syria’s in September 2013.

Buyers should check that the object’s condition matches the documentation and look for suspicious marks indicating illegal excavation. When in doubt, Ms Doyle recommends seeking a second opinion.

Despite all the restrictions in place, some critics say the existence of a legal antiquities market, where some items sell for over £10m, encourages looting, even if looted antiquities only sell for a tiny fraction of these amounts — or not at all. Others argue the legal trade keeps the illegal trade in check. “People have been collecting antiquities for 2,000 years,” says Mr Coplin. “By not permitting space for a licit market, you invite an illicit market.”

He thinks that the legal market, where even top quality items with a strong provenance can sell for just a few thousand dollars and demand for Middle Eastern antiquities is limited, is too small to inspire looting on the scale reported in Syria and Iraq. “The legal antiquities trade worldwide can’t be more than \$200m annually,” he says. “The market is just not there for billions of dollars of illegal antiquities.”

But looted items can easily bypass the legal market altogether. “Valuable pieces could go straight from the ground, through a middleman, into a wealthy individual’s collection in Europe, the US, the Gulf or the Far East and we’ll never know about it,” says Mr Al-Azm.

Careless collectors can claim no such ignorance about the systematic looting in Iraq and Syria, or its bloody results. “They really have no excuse,” says Ms Doyle.