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Review of ‘*Object biographies: collaborative approaches to ancient Mediterranean art*’

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John North Hopkins, Sarah Kielt Costello, Paul R. Davis, Object biographies: collaborative approaches to ancient Mediterranean art. Houston: The Menil Collection, 2021. Pp. 240. ISBN 9780300250879 \$50.00.

Review by

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Archaeologists generally maintain that the context of discovery provides more information about past societies than the object itself does. Are objects without context then worthless? To the contrary, this book argues that contextualizing the acquisition of a museum’s holdings vastly expands our understanding of both past and present societies. This superbly edited volume provides a series of thoughtful and timely essays addressing the moral, ethical, and legal aspects of museum collections. Broad-minded, it brings together diverse and evenhanded arguments about how to deal with and how to (re-)present objects acquired on the “free” market, while requests for restitution or repatriation are recurring issues. The book focuses on unprovenanced objects from the Mediterranean, but the questions it raises are more widely relevant. What are the challenges for the 21st century’s curators when dealing with collections created in the 20th century, especially with objects that have a shadowy provenance? How should these reflections be integrated into the current acquisition policy of museums?

The book is divided into two unequal parts, the first (introduction and eight chapters) dealing with unprovenanced objects in the Menil Collection. This museum was founded by John and Dominique de Menil who, thanks to their fortune from the oil business, from the 1940s to the 1990s bought a diverse array of objects—African, Native American, Byzantine, Contemporary—and,

the focus of these essays, artifacts now in a collection called “Arts of the Ancient World”. The second part of the book provides three essays from the staff of American museums (San Antonio Museum of Art, J. Paul Getty Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Art) as well as a contribution about the entanglement of archaeology and warfare (Brian Rose). The first part has its origin in the 2016 conference “Collaborative Futures for Museum Collections: Antiquities, Provenance and Cultural Heritage” on unprovenanced objects from the Menil Collection, the fruit of a collaboration between the Collection and students and staff of Rice University, beginning in 2014.

The introduction by the editors (Paul R. Davis, John North Hopkins, Sarah Kielt Costello) presents the background of the book, explaining how the project is aligned with the mission of the Menil Collection, which is committed to its founders’ belief that art is essential to the human experience. Courageously reflecting the wish to strengthen the connection between the Ancient World Collection and the public, the book challenges its own publisher by initiating an honest, deep, and rigorous introspection. The introduction provides a concise overview of the collectors and the collections of the museum, addressing (briefly) the relationship of the Menil with art dealers, and how the art market operated at the time the ancient collection was formed.¹ The essay clearly acknowledges the loss of information about context through the art market but, in line with Kopytoff,² maintains that the biography of an object is a satisfactory avenue towards new research that goes beyond aesthetic evaluation. Hence, the research question moves from the quest to understand the function of the object in the past, into an exploration of the function of this object now, as it is exhibited or kept in a museum’s storerooms. Even if there are no new theoretical developments in the introduction, it sets the stage for the wide range of the following essays. The first of these confront the information provided when an object is acquired on the art market with state-of-the-art research. In chapter one, Sarah Kielt Costello presents an Early Dynastic statuette and discusses the discrepancies between style, inscription, and proposed date. Instead of directly dealing with the ethics of the recent acquisition of the statue (1983), she suggests that the piece was unknown before 1981 and was probably looted sometime after 1970. She also suggests that the inscription on the back of the figurine was added in the 20th century (CE). The contribution of John North Hopkins deals with two “classical” sculpted heads and shows how biased interest in classical portraits (rather than complete statues) contributed to faulty interpretations: one head was wrongly attributed by the dealer, and the second is (very probably) a fake. While the author highlights unethical or illegal past acquisition practices, he maintains that objects’ biographies “help archaeologists, art historians, and museum professionals reconnect with one another and with a public that deserves this context” (p. 62).

Chapters 3 (Susan Langdon) and 4 (Nassos Papalexandrou) directly address the disastrous consequences of the art market, which acts as a catalyst in the destruction of archaeological remains through the search for marketable objects. Even though Susan Langdon does not engage with the biography of the object and its way into the collection, she points to the ethical problems facing researchers studying museum objects. Indeed, even without archaeological context, objects still provide otherwise inaccessible information on the past. The contribution of Papalexandrou is also explicit concerning the role of the art market in the destruction of archaeological contexts, pointing out that the aesthetic values of the 20th century are “considerably better documented than the lives of these objects in antiquity” (p. 101). In chapter 6, Paul R. Davis, a Curator at the Menil Collection, scrutinizes the statue of a bull and tracks how this object was acquired with

¹The book duly refers to other publications. See Kristina Van Dyke, “Losing One’s Head: John and Dominique De Menil as Collectors”. in: Josef Helfenstein and Lauren Schipsi (eds.), *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique De Menil* (p. 119–137). Houston: The Menil Collection, 2010.

²Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process”. in: A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (p. 64–92). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

the label “3rd century BCE – 2nd century CE, reportedly from Asia Minor”. Highlighting the many question marks and culpable silences in the biography, he clearly points to the problem of dealing with unprovenanced and marketed objects, because so few records are necessary to trade antiquities. He raises doubts about the authenticity of this object from the collection that he curates, demonstrating an honesty not always attested at other museums.

Chapters 5 and 7 are sound contributions highlighting how much can be gained when the biographies of objects are fleshed out. Gates-Foster considers the potential of engaging with the use of racialized imagery. She addresses terracotta figurines depicting images of “Africans” from Graeco-Roman Egypt and cogently investigates how these images of “the others” connect racial discrimination in ancient Mediterranean societies to the views of 19th-century collectors. Eventually, the opposite stance impelled the Menil to buy them for their anti-segregation project, entitled “Image of the Black in Western Art”. Reflecting on this historical twist, the author points out with a certain irony that these objects are still deprived of context in their museum presentation, limiting the disentanglement of represented and representation. Betsy M. Bryan provides a fascinating account of the “life” of an Egyptian lintel (1160–1150 BCE). It is one of the few objects presented with an unambiguous provenance: Hermopolis Magna. It was discovered in 1935 during official excavations and came into the Menil collection in 1964. The paper deals with the object’s life before its archaeological discovery, showing that the lintel had already been moved and reshaped in antiquity. Then the author explores the period between its discovery in Egypt and its appearance on the American art market. She proves without a doubt that it was stolen in the years around World War II and that “it is difficult to ignore the connections of the site’s primary excavators with the Nazi party” (p. 164–165). The last contribution on the Menil Collection (Nassos Papalexandrou, chapter 8) deals with two painted terracotta plaques of the 6th century BCE, now attributed to Düver, in Turkey, and acquired in 1965. This paper presents the evidence of looting and tackles the question of the responsibility of current holders, asking the urgent question about “how a twenty-first-century museum might compensate for this loss in an ethically responsible way” (p. 174). Pointing to the duty to display the objects and ensure that they have “an active social life through encounters with a large and diverse public of museum visitors” (p. 179–180), Papalexandrou makes the compelling argument that highlighting the violence in their biographies, particularly the life phase from looted artefact to “art object”, is a moral responsibility. This last chapter, even if the author concedes that it could be seen as “radical” (p. 181), proposes a concrete solution and lets the reader think about what an exhibition of “Ancient World” objects in the future could be, thus making the transition to the second part of the volume.

In contrast to the stances in the first part, chapters 9–11 (Jessica Powers; David Saunders, Judith Barr, and Nicole Budrovich; Victoria S. Reed) are more conventional, but help to place the ideas expressed in the first part in a wider frame. Jessica Powers recalls the diversity in the formation of collections, with museums “inheriting” collections without having taken part in the acquisition process, and suggests that each object should ideally be researched individually. She recounts a stunning 500-year biography of Roman urns, first documented in the collection of Pope Julius III (1487–1555), then reported in England, then again in Italy after World War II, before arriving in the US. Despite the position of the J. Paul Getty Museum at the center of many controversies, the contribution from and about the institution (chapter 10) touches only upon objects with an old provenance history. While the first part of the book highly criticizes the art market, Victoria S. Reed’s contribution is a handbook about how to avoid legal problems in the acquisition of antiquities in the 21st century. She deals with how museums can “minimize the risk that is inherent in acquiring ancient material” (p. 223). For example, she considers it perfectly ethical to have

bought a votive figure (fig 11.1, p. 220) from Cyprus in 2013,³ even though the “provenance could only be traced to 1975” and the figure was “lacking an export permit or a documented provenance to 1970” (p. 227–228). Finally, the last contribution (by Brian Rose) discusses the problem of war and archaeology, but it is not quite in line with the theme of the book, giving a one-sided view of how archaeologists may contribute to military “expertise”.⁴ However, by explaining the case of the Troy Gold, Rose shows that the threshold of 1970 (the date of the UNESCO Convention) is not sufficient for an item to be considered an “ethical” acquisition. Finally, the epilogue ends the book by asking the question, what would the Menil have done, if they had known about the murky past of some of their acquisitions?

Overall, this volume certainly achieves one of the main goals of its editors, to engage the public with ancient artifacts. The authors penned fine biographical essays that are pleasant to read and beautifully written with the layperson in mind. Each contribution can be read separately, considerable efforts have been expended to render the text accessible but precise, and footnotes give access to many references. It is noteworthy that the core of each text does not try to exaggerate or avoid the problems associated with objects from the art market. Each author in the first part also duly recognizes the openness of the Menil Collection and the support they have received throughout their independent research. A large public of curious minds, art historians, and archaeologists will benefit from this book’s bringing together diverse views and making a convincing call for open discussions without being paralyzed by looking for an impossible, “perfect” solution. However, some limits must be stressed. Reading the book from another continent makes it certainly evident that the book does not take research in other countries into account and does not address the specificity of the formation of American collections.⁵ Moreover, visitors of the online collections and website are conspicuously absent. Surprisingly, the Menil Collection’s website still does not address the points made in the book. Nothing is said about the 1983 acquisition of the Sumerian votive figurine,⁶ the destruction caused by illegally digging for Greek bronze quadrupeds,⁷ the looting of a Greek monumental building,⁸ the theft from an Egyptian excavation storehouse through Nazi connections,⁹ or the doubtful authenticity of the “Anatolian” statue of a bull.¹⁰ As its publisher, the Collection could have made the book open access, thus allowing more people to read the texts (even if given the quality of the book, it does not seem overpriced). In the meantime, however, for those who want another longer overview of the book, a video presentation organized by The New York Institute of Fine Arts (April 11, 2021) is available.¹¹

³Statue of a man in Egyptianizing dress: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/580226/statue-of-a-man-in-egyptianizing-dress> (consulted 2022-01-13)

⁴See, for example, for a critical review of this issue, Susan Pollock, “Archaeology and Contemporary Warfare”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 45, 2016, p. 215–231.

⁵For example, research from and on the Louvre, British Museum, and Pergamon Museum is not mentioned, neither is the question of colonial histories addressed.

⁶Sumerian votive figure: <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/2887-votive-figure> (consulted 2022-01-13)

⁷Greek bronzes: <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/5526-votive-figurine-or-pendant-of-a-fawn-with-chain>(consulted 2022-01-13)

⁸Revetment plaques from Düver: <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/210-revetment-plaque-depicting-equestrian-figure-and-griffin> (consulted 2022-01-13)

⁹Egyptian relief: <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/16686-sunken-relief-of-the-deceased-ramesses-hakht>(consulted 2022-01-13)

¹⁰Statue of a bull: <https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/5731-statue-of-a-bull> (consulted 2022-01-13)

¹¹Edward Sullivan, Sarah Kiert Costello, Paul R. Davis, John North Hopkins, Laetitia La Follette, “Object Biographies: A Conversation on a New Volume”, <https://vimeo.com/535483982>, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York, Uploaded Sunday, April 11, 2021

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