

Interview with Jean-Claude Gandur

World Heritage:

Do you have any pieces in your collection that come from World Heritage sites or monuments? How can you be sure that these pieces are not the product of trafficking?

Jean-Claude Gandur (JCG): The collection held at the Gandur Foundation for Art – which I started to build up almost 40 years ago – as of today boasts over 1,200 artefacts from the whole Mediterranean basin. The heart of my collection – over half the objects – is from Egyptian archaeology, while the rest comes mainly from Greece and the geographical area corresponding to the Roman Empire. The near-Eastern archaeological collection has not become any larger, given the doubtful provenance of numerous objects available on the market today. Yes, there probably are some objects among these artefacts that in the past belonged to sites today inscribed on the World Heritage List. And yet all these objects belonged to collections that were built up in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. When I see an object for sale that could fit into my collection, which would add an element of ‘soul’, the curators who work for my Foundation make preliminary enquiries using the diverse red lists (Interpol, UNESCO) to make sure that it is not a stolen object or one that has come from looting.

Moreover, when I buy certain objects, I feel a kind of pride, because I am joining the ranks of the great collectors from previous centuries: it is a great joy to know that I am now the happy owner of a panel from a sarcophagus that once decorated Émile Zola’s garden, or a little bronze ram that once belonged to the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann and which he probably held in his own hands! It is such a subtle pleasure to imagine Pierre Loti composing *Disenchanted* in front of the Egyptian funeral mask I purchased some years ago... To my mind, the fact that an object has belonged to a nominally and historically well-known collector in a way gives it an extra historical dimension. Certain collections of small objects also possess historical value as a whole and reflect the personality of the collector: and so I prefer – whenever possible, of course – not to take apart these collections that were previously put together with great patience by others, in which objects make sense through their relationship to others. I tell myself it is fortunate for these objects, which belonged to significant personalities in the 19th and 20th centuries, to start a new life now in my own collections, where they can be seen by a much wider public, as this is the mission undertaken by the Gandur Foundation for Art.

WH: When you buy antiques or other cultural assets, to what extent do you apply the criteria for diligence required by the ICOM code and other legal instruments such as the UNESCO Conventions (1970) and UNIDROIT (1995)? And how do you do it?

JCG: I apply them strictly because we work in compliance with the ICOM rules, and we are a member of this organization. I have always been sensitive to the question of where pieces come from, and mainly



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I buy objects that belonged previously to other collections, which is why we had no difficulties when the new laws came into force in Switzerland (LTBC, in 2005). In fact, we only buy what comes from a reliable source (objects that belonged to other collections, true, but which have, as far as possible, already been described in publications by researchers or which have been mentioned in catalogues). For example, this is precisely why I refused to buy a Roman sarcophagus, which by the way was magnificent; but its provenance was not clear and alas, today we know that it doubtless came from trafficking. There is no room in our collections for dubious pieces, even if they are significant objects for archaeology or for ethnology, a collection which I am currently putting together. To pursue this aim, the curators who work for the Foundation do background work on the object’s origins before a possible purchase. Firstly, we only talk to reputable sellers and galleries, and we never buy online, which is where all trafficking takes place. Then, we only show an interest in objects whose provenance and history are duly explained and verifiable. Finally, we ask the seller for additional information if the name of the previous owner appears only as initials. In short, it is investigative work, requiring the basic principles of historical criticism, which leads us to ask questions about the plausibility of a so-called collection. If we have any doubts about the object or where it supposedly comes from, we do not buy it. Not only that, but in collaboration with the Museum of Art in Geneva we carried out an ethics survey on Egyptian objects acquired before 2005, and we are going to extend this to pieces from classical archaeology.

WH: Have you ever added pieces to your collection that you then had to return to their country of origin?

JCG: We have, unfortunately. In 2009 I bought an alabaster palette with a sacred inscription, used for holding the seven canonical oils for the Egyptian funeral rite. I bought it at the TEFAF in Maastricht from a legitimate antique dealer based in Brussels, a member of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art (IADAA). This object was a significant ritual element in funeral offerings in ancient Egypt. I bought it in good faith, trusting totally in its fine provenance, which showed that it had previously belonged to diverse collections (notably a 'former French M. C. B. collection, 1950'), before it came into the hands of this dealer. I was also convinced by the serious and solemn framework the object was presented in: we should be able to believe that such a prestigious organization as the TEFAF only sells ethically irreproachable objects. The object's whole provenance was an invention! In effect, some time later, I had the chance to show the object to a specialist who said he had seen it published in 2006.... The palette, which had been exhibited in Saqqara in 1996 and kept in the excavations store of the Antiquities Service, had been stolen from there some time between 2006 and 2009. Of course, I gave the object back to Egypt without making any claims for financial compensation. I did, however, start criminal proceedings against the antique dealer who was at the heart of this trafficking.

WH: Do you think that collectors are sufficiently well informed or aware of the illicit trade in cultural assets and of the importance of an asset's origin/traceability?

JCG: No. First of all, I would say that, unfortunately, this is something to which collectors pay very little attention if they do not intend to make their collection public. In other words, in the majority of cases, there is a high risk that an object from illicit trade will disappear for a long time in a private collection that will only be seen by the collector and those close to him. What's more, regarding objects coming from clandestine digs, the vast majority of collectors are probably unaware that an object taken out of its archaeological context definitively loses the essential scientific information it could reveal – particularly chronological and topographical information. This is an irremediable loss. As I often say, 'without unscrupulous buyers, there would be no trafficking'. The 'last link in the chain' must make an ethical effort when it comes to buying a piece. Nothing justifies looting, and looting heritage in no way preserves it.

It is therefore important for collectors to buy in full awareness of these considerations, and if they are not capable of doing it or do not have the time, they should seek advice from professionals. The need to seek advice from professionals in archaeology is especially important given the situation today, which is particularly troubled. As for me, I work with a team of professionals, well versed in documentary research and the study of archives.

Then, once an object has been bought by the collector, it has to be published, in other words entrusted to a specialist for scientific study. An object effectively only makes sense if it is publicly brought into the scientific community's sphere of knowledge. The Gandur



Gope, Papua New Guinea, early 20th century.

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Foundation for Art systematically publishes its collections and ensures their visibility by means of modern communications, notably on our web site, where 45 per cent of our collections are already accessible to everyone; we hope to further develop this aspect of communication over the coming months.

In other words, it would be advisable for private collectors to give up their anonymity and approach academic circles in order to open up their collection to specialists, and to collaborate more with museums, allowing the content of their collections to be examined by museum curators. Beyond the emotion one can feel in surrounding oneself with beautiful and venerable objects, becoming a collector is a true asceticism that always implies a quest and perhaps also sacrifice.

WH: What message would you like to send to the art market to improve/reinforce the fight against trafficking cultural assets in zones of conflict?

JCG: Stepping up the fight against the trafficking of cultural assets in zones of conflict is an enterprise that has to be carried out on various fronts, where the art market is unfortunately only one participant (compared to the problems inherent in the 'source countries'). True, if there were no demand, there would be no looting, or at least not as much. Collectors should be ethically irreproachable, and should never compromise on objects with no provenance, or with incomplete or unreliable information. We have had to insist so many times that sellers give us the names of the people who created the previous collections. If the collectors who demand the names of the previous owners do not receive the information they are asking for, they should quite simply refuse to buy. Certain countries – even

European ones – are infamous for being very lax when it comes to the trafficking of cultural assets. We have to make buyers more aware in this area too, to stop them from buying assets that have come through these countries.

Collectors, dealers and gallery owners or sellers should agree to give the name and date when the collection was constituted in all transparency. The countries of origin should have inventories of the objects in their collections and of the pieces dug up from their sites. Collectors should likewise draw up systematic inventories with photographs of their assets. (Very good software is available on the market, specifically designed for this kind of material). This makes objects traceable.

To sum up, we should stress education: education for collectors in ethnography and archaeology, education for dealers in scientific problems, and of course, education for the countries of origin (customs officers, teachers, field workers), who should be made aware of their heritage and the need to preserve it.

Finally, we can also hope that a collector who has acquired an object in good faith, but ends up the victim of fraud orchestrated by an expert, will be protected. It is a pity that collectors often have to find their way through a multitude of different legal texts that protect our common heritage. There is an urgent need for our common heritage to be governed by a single legislation, applicable everywhere, aiming to preserve and highlight world heritage in a climate of serenity.

Education, communication, transparency and opening up private collections to others, in accordance with humanist principles, seem to be, to my mind, the key elements in an efficient battle against the trafficking of cultural assets, for collectors and the art market in general. 🌐



Bronze ram statue, Greece, 4th-2nd century BC.

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Funerary mask, Egypt, 2nd century AD.

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