

RESEARCH ETHICS

Studying Artifacts of Uncertain Origin

ASOR Round Table * Friday, November 19, 2010, 12:45–2:00 PM
Sheraton Atlanta Hotel, Augusta Room, Second Floor

CSIG (Coroplastic Studies Interest Group), sponsor

This Round Table will consider how the field should deal with controversial issues of study, exhibition, and publication of artifacts whose origins are contested or unknown. Our brief exchange of views may contribute to a clearer understanding of researcher responsibility and a cogent statement about how we can collectively and as individuals combat abuse and illegal trafficking in archaeological objects of study.

Organized by Rick Hauser

Senior Staff, Archaeological Expedition to Urkesh

with the participation of

Christina Kahrl Brody

Assistant Registrar, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Author, “Studying the Skeletons in the Closet: Unprovenanced Archeological Material in Museums”

Zahi Hawass (recorded intervention)

Secretary General, The Supreme Council of Antiquities, Egypt

Author, “Inside the Egyptian Museum . . .”

David I. Owen (recorded intervention)

Bernard and Jane Schapiro Professor of Ancient Near Eastern and Judaic Studies,
Cornell University

Author, “Censoring Knowledge: The Case for the Publication of Unprovenanced Artifacts”

Elizabeth C. Stone (recorded intervention)

Professor, Department of Anthropology, SUNY at Stony Brook

Author, “Archaeological Site Looting: The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Southern Iraq”

Christopher A. Tuttle

Associate Director, American Center of Oriental Research Amman, Jordan

Author, “The Nabataean Coroplastic Arts:

A New Approach for Studying Figurines, Plaques, Vessels, and other Clay Objects”





Stone

My basic feeling [about] a lot of the material that comes out, is that (A) it is meaningless outside its context, so I don't know why you are studying it. And (B) you haven't the faintest idea whether it's real or fake.

Owen

Objects have value outside of context. This bugaboo that has been promoted . . . that context is everything is exactly that—it's absolute nonsense.

Hawass

Regardless of whether an artifact has a known origin or not, it is still of academic and scientific value and should certainly be studied. You can't ignore it! [Without this,] the objects would live in the dark, all the time.

Brody

[Unprovenanced artifacts in museum collections] are a sort of "skeleton in the closet". They are not researched, exhibited, or used for educational purposes, and are certainly not published. While this is ethically and legally a safe approach, it abandons the museum's mission. . . . Research of a collection is not only the obligation of a museum; it is included in the very definition of the institution.

Join us!

