



## Cesnola, The Metropolitan Museum and the 19th Century Spectacle

Ann-Marie Knoblauch | Virginia Tech University

### *Archaeology of Cyprus*

*Friday, November 20, 2020*

In December 1880, the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art convened an internal committee to investigate charges that Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the museum's director, had recklessly restored ancient Cypriot sculpture he had sold to the museum. The accusation had made headlines in New York papers, as did the committee's report, when six weeks later Cesnola was cleared of all charges. The trustees then decided to take two of the statues mentioned in the complaint and display them prominently and unprotected in the center of the museum's Grand Hall. Beside them, cards were set up to explain the charges, along with labels claiming the charges had been found to be false.

This exhibit attracted thousands of people to the museum in a two-week period, as both experts in sculpture and antiquities as well as members of the lay public were invited to examine the statues up close. Many performed their own tests, some using chisels and caustic potash solution to attempt to find the seams of the restorations. In creating this spectacle, the Met's trustees were responding to the public's appetite for knowledge, particularly when it involved debunking experts. P.T. Barnum had become rich by creating elaborate hoaxes, then charging his delighted audience to learn how he did it. I argue that the Metropolitan took a page out of Barnum's playbook by creating a spectacle that brought visitors into the museum, but ultimately undermined expert knowledge on Cypriot sculpture for years to come.