

# To Fight ISIS, Art Dealers & Archaeologists Join Forces

## The Creators Project

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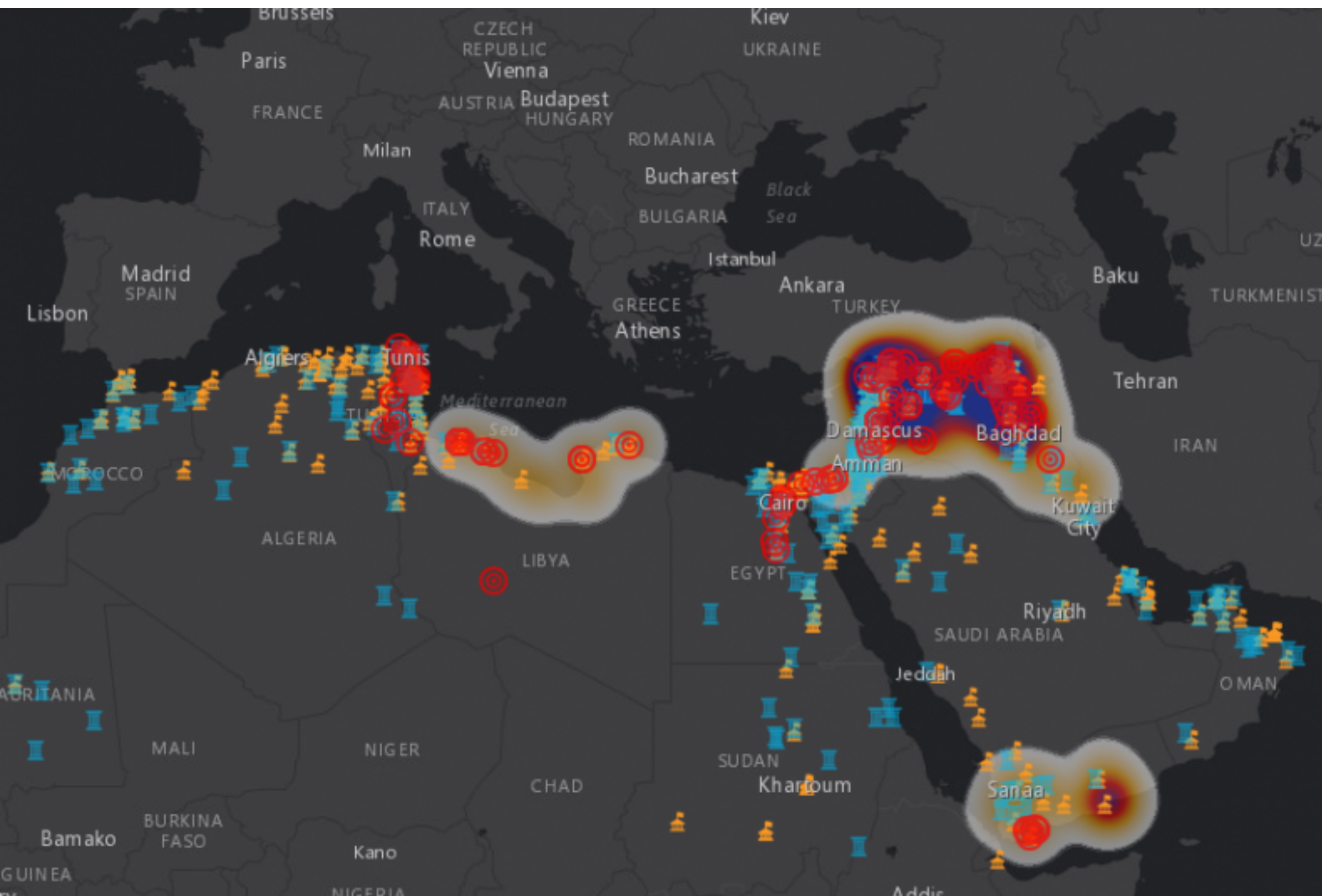
Catherine Chapman — Mar 11 2016

Stretching 20cm high, the exaggerated feminine curves of Halaf terracotta figurines are a symbol of fertility, dating back to Neolithic times in Syria.

Neil Brodie is an illicit trade expert who spent [three months searching for these items online](#), now on a list of cultural objects at risk by the International Council of Museums, on eBay.co.uk. He found 60, sold by seven dealers typically based outside London, for an average price of £102. Brodie thinks the majority are fake, but the rest could be from ISIS-held areas in Syria and Iraq. At an art auction, similar figurines could be worth [up to an estimated \\$1,500](#).

The value of cultural heritage has always been a contentious issue within the world of art. Things intensified in 2014, when, as a global society, we began to bear witness to the irreversible amount of cultural cleansing being performed by ISIS in places like Mosul, Raqqa, and now Palmyra. While an unknown amount of antiques and artifacts have either been lost or destroyed, in a once divided scene of archaeologists, museums, collectors and dealers, a coalition of culture is starting to fight back.

“There’s tons of material that could be from Syria,” says Brodie, who has been searching for pieces amid [reports](#) that looting by ISIS is being fuelled by demand from established antiquity markets like the US, Europe and China. “It could have come out of Syria 20 years ago or it could have come out last week. I don’t know. There’s no way of knowing.”



A screenshot of The [Antiquities Coalition](#)'s Map of Culture Under Threat. Photo: The [Antiquities Coalition](#)

Plundering culturally rich locations for objects to be sold illegally on the legitimate market has been around since the discovery of buried treasure, and is a problem not confined to ISIS alone. Despite the presence of nation-based cultural property laws, conflict areas around the world face the loss of heritage, which archaeologists like Brodie believe will not be stopped if commercial values continue to be designated to these ancient items.

Yet, the situation in Syria has given way to something else entirely. Many, including Brodie, warn of how exaggerated numbers related to how much ISIS is making from the illicit sale of antiquities—reported as the terrorist organization’s [second biggest earner](#), anywhere between [\\$4 million to billions](#)—entice looting, rather than diminish it, potentially bringing further damage to monuments and archaeological resources.

“It encourages Syrians who are without jobs or other resources to become looters and treasure hunters in their own backyard,” says [Kate Fitz Gibbon](#), an art and cultural heritage lawyer based in the US. “The US State Department and archaeological extremists have hijacked the Syrian crisis to claim that cultural losses are due to a multi-billion-dollar market in illicit antiquities backed by ISIS, which does not and never has existed,” she tells The Creators Project over email.



Archaeologists and antiquity collectors and dealers share a passion for the past and its preservation, a mutual devotion that has, historically, never been communicated. While most archaeologists insist that cultural artifacts should remain in their local contexts, campaigners for the trade take an international view that artifacts should be shared, especially when some countries, like Syria, do not have the appropriate infrastructures to protect their own heritage.



Before: Palmyra Mausoleum of Mohammad Bin Ali. Photo from militant social media account, courtesy The Antiquities Coalition.



After: Palmyra Mausoleum of Mohammad Bin Ali. Photo from militant social media account, courtesy The Antiquities Coalition

Although museums may be heavily dependent on donations by these antiquity collectors, however against the sale of looted material the legitimate market is, [public examples](#) of stolen artefacts in auction house catalogs have made the industry difficult to trust. And in spite of a lack of concrete evidence of so-called "blood antiquities" flooding the showrooms of New York or London, the prospect of terrorism being funded by the legitimate trade has called for the complete shutdown of the sale of Syrian antiquities, both by [the UN](#) and the US' [Protect and Preserve International Cultural Property Act \(H.R. 1493\)](#). The bill, currently before Senate, will stop the import of antiquities into the United States that were illegally removed from Syria as of March 15, 2011, legislation similar to restrictions placed on cultural objects [taken from Iraq after 1990](#).

However, since most looted items typically go underground for a period of five to ten years, according to US Homeland Security, establishing whether a piece has been stolen at this stage is on the borderline of impossible, making any policy seem reactive, rather than preventative.

“If you shut down the antiquities trade in the market countries, looting is still going to continue,” says [James E. McAndrew](#), an international art theft expert and former member of the State Department’s Cultural Property Task Force. “The pieces are going to find a home and a buyer because it's not always US-driven.”

McAndrew’s firsthand experience in dealing with investigations into the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage items globally, is that the most sought after pieces are likely to remain in neighboring countries—in Syria’s case, oil-rich destinations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

While Saddam Hussein-era objects did make their way onto US shores—having since been [returned to Iraq](#)—McAndrew explains that previous claims of Gulf War antiquities showing up in US markets have yet to yield any results, and that the State Department’s [\\$5 million award](#) for any information pertaining to ISIS-financed cultural heritage items is unlikely to produce any returns either.





Before: Tomb of Jonah in Mosul, Iraq. Photo credit: Diyar (@DKurdistan) 24 July 2014. Image courtesy The Antiquities Coalition.



After: Tomb of Jonah in Mosul, Iraq. Photo Credit: Diyar (@DKurdistan) 24 July 2014. Image courtesy The Antiquities Coalition

“The only way to address the conflict is in the zone of the conflict,” McAndrew tells The Creators Project. “Support the countries surrounding the conflict area by putting much stronger enforcement at the point of entry.”

McAndrew and others feel that more needs to be done in source countries, efforts that international bodies and the [1970 UNESCO Convention](#), aimed at preventing the illicit trade of cultural heritage, have failed to address proactively. Time and time again, improvements to this problem have been obstructed by various art world agendas, but in the abomination that is ISIS, a new period has begun.

“Different entities, the archaeological community, collectors, auction houses and museums, are trying to reach across the table to come up with some solutions,” says McAndrew. “That’s finally the right thing to do.”

In [September 2015](#), the State Department partnered with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to bring together a range of experts, all affected by the ISIS threat



to culture and those objects yielding a bountiful information about our shared human civilization. Whether trader or excavator, all are solution-driven.

A digitally recreated Temple of Bel located in Palmyra, Syria, an example of digital recreation from the [#NEWPALMYRA](#) project. Render by [Areebonary](#).

“What I think we can all agree on is that this is a major global crime,” says Deborah Lehr, Chairman of the [Antiquities Coalition](#). “There are many players and it’s very complicated to determine what the tract is. It’s no different to what happens in the gun or sex trade.

Lehr is working with the University of Chicago and a team of archaeologists, economists and sociologists to produce an accurate estimate on how much money is being made off the sale of looted antiquities in the areas of Iraq and Syria.

“The biggest challenge in this field is that there’s no real information or statistics on the size of this illegal trade,” says Lehr, a statement that even the trade itself might agree with.

On the other side of the Atlantic, differences are also being put aside to find a way to tackle the illegal trade of cultural heritage, endeavors that may be too late for Syria, but will aim to prevent this happening in whichever country that next finds themselves amidst war and terror.

“In Britain, we have open dialogue with the trade to try to come together with some kind of pragmatic compromise between the interest of all groups,” says Brodie.

“We could sit around for another 20 years doing nothing, or we could try to sit down and try to get some kind of agreement in place, which would probably be far from ideal, but would be better than nothing.”