

Diamonds in the Dust: The Underlying Pedagogical Value of Old Material Collections

Christine Johnston

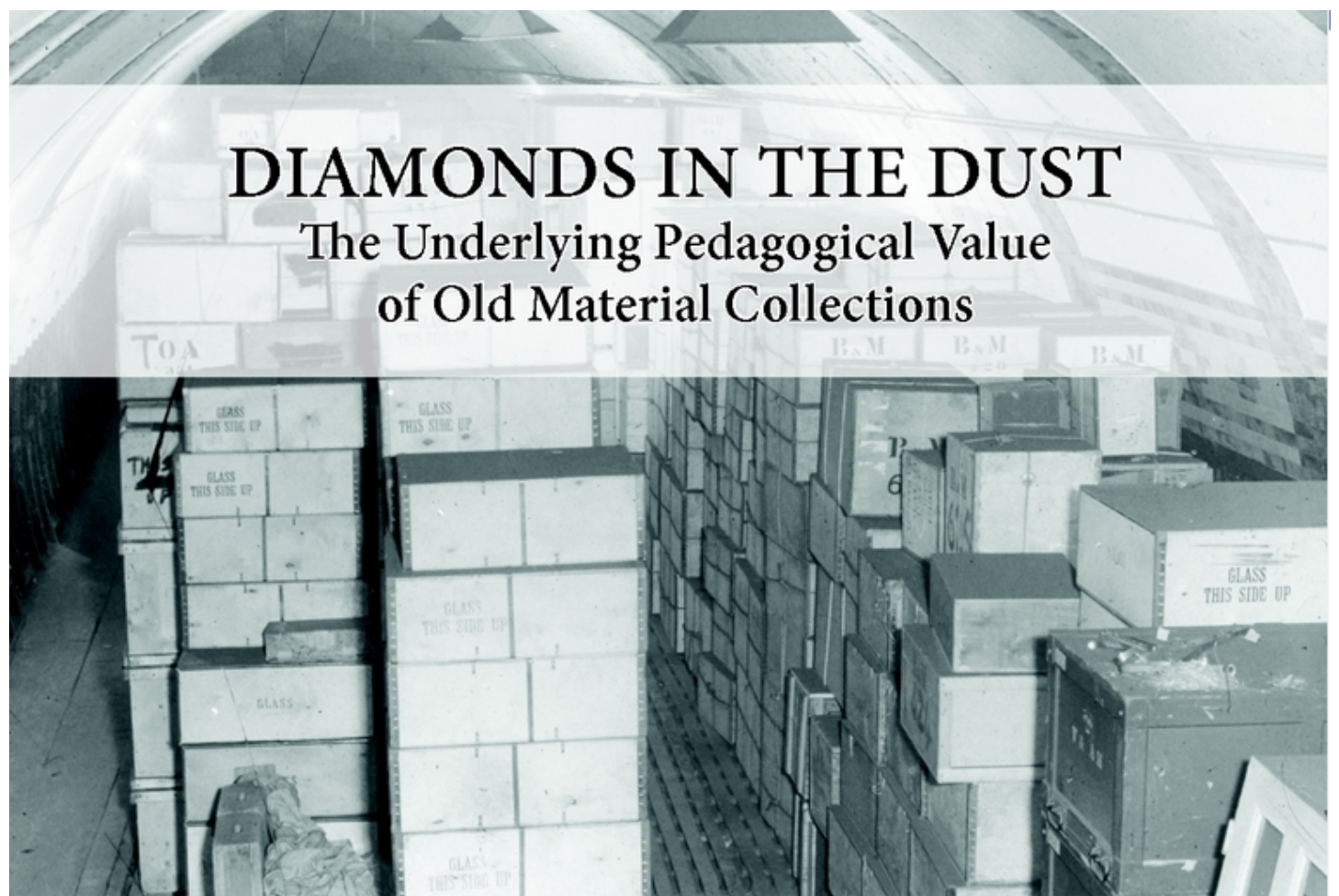
Near Eastern Archaeology

Vol. 79, No. 2 (June 2016), pp. 108-116

Published by: [The American Schools of Oriental Research](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5615/neareastarch.79.2.0108>

Page Count: 9



Storage of British Museum materials in the Aldwych Underground station during World War II. Photograph courtesy of the ICCROM archives.

As cultural heritage across the world continues to fall victim to political unrest and ideological agendas, the archaeological community is acutely aware of its role as stewards of the past and its material. The recent desecration of historic monuments has elicited international public outcry, and highlighted the need for cooperation and transparency in the shared responsibility for the protection of cultural heritage. While deliberate acts of destruction are clearly abhorrent to the archaeological community, they also effectively throw into sharp relief the need for preservation and protection against all threats – the most ubiquitous being time, disregard, and decay.

Protection against deterioration is a concern for both archaeological sites and excavated material, for which physical conservation is a primary task. Of subsidiary yet significant importance is the prevention of data degradation resulting from the effects of time and neglect on records or materials deemed to be of secondary research value. These lower value material groups often include unprovenanced artifacts and objects with low stratigraphic or contextual value. The treatment of unprovenanced artifacts is as ethically ambiguous as it is contentious. Published statutes such as the 1970 UNESCO convention on the sale and import of cultural property have established protocols upon which archaeologists and museum curators have sought to

develop industry wide standards of practice. Yet practices and philosophies are anything but consistent.

At the crux of the debate over the sale of antiquities is the role played by museums and private individuals in perpetuating looting through their demand, fueling a lucrative market for illicit objects. Today, the culpability of the “demand” parties as drivers of supply extends to the purpose to which profits from such sales are ultimately directed, including the funding of terrorist organizations (fig. 1). Although not all profiteering from looted materials is directed to such ends, the system as a whole – including the unknowing consumers – are responsible in part for even the most extreme negative externalities of the antiquities trade. To curb the role of the art market in funding extremism, the United States Senate unanimously passed legislation to ban the importation of all Syrian art and artifacts,¹ following the recommendations of an interdisciplinary task force of industry advocates and museum and university personnel. The report, titled *#CultureUnderThreat: Recommendations for the U.S. Government*, grew from a conference of the same name convened in Cairo in May of 2015.² The report warns the U.S. government and the broader international community of the lasting damage to cultural heritage and the local economy caused by the looting and destruction in Syria. The direct link between looting and the funding of extremism is stressed,

Abstract

The ethics of studying or collecting unprovenanced material is intrinsically tied to the issue of looting. In recent years looting has become increasingly facilitated by the current political instability in various parts of the world, with looted objects often serving as a highly lucrative source of income for insurgent or even terrorist groups. As international statutes and industry protocols aim to alleviate further threats to cultural heritage, consideration is also due to the future of the vast collections of unprovenanced and subsidiary material acquired through decades of cultural tourism and incipient archaeological exploration. A survey of Canadian and American academic institutions was conducted to determine the extent of department-held material collections, as well as the current pedagogical and research purposes to which they are directed.