

# Repatriating the Past: Filling the Holes in Egypt's History Left by Looting

## – Katie A. Paul, The Antiquities Coalition

**UPON ENTERING THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM AS TOURISTS SCAN THE CASES OF “WONDERFUL THINGS,” ONE CASE CONTAINING A STUNNING SARCOPHAGUS STANDS OUT. IT’S EYE CATCHING NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE BEAUTY OF THE ARTIFACT, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THE LABEL DESCRIBING ITS LOCATION SAYS “UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.” NO, THIS IS NOT A REPRODUCTION—IT’S A STOLEN ANTIQUITY THAT WAS TRAFFICKED OUT OF EGYPT, AND ONE OF THE FEW LOOTED PIECES THAT HAS MADE ITS WAY HOME.**

Known as “Shesep-Amun-Tay-Es-Heret,” or simply “the Lady of the House,” this artifact was the highlight of a repatriation ceremony that took place in April 2015 in Washington, DC. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Customs Enforcement (DHS ICE) [seized](#) the sarcophagus in 2009, not from a shipping container or from the auction block, but from an antiquities dealer’s garage in Brooklyn during the investigation for a case dubbed “[Operation Mummy’s Curse](#).”

Antiquities looting in many places is as old as the antiquities themselves. The ancient Egyptians even designed their tombs to thwart the looters of antiquity. But looting today goes far beyond the pillaging done by tomb raiders in ancient history. After the 2011 Arab Spring, the acceleration of looting in countries across the Middle East and North Africa has skyrocketed to levels previously unseen. In recent years, Egypt has fallen victim to some of the worst industrialized looting occurring in the MENA region, with [well-armed gangs](#) composed of [dozens](#) of people raiding some of the country’s most precious archaeological sites, including those at the country’s most famous site: the Pyramids of Giza.

Since 2011, Egypt has seen two uprisings, multiple government transitions, ministerial changes, engaged in the fight against a terrorism insurgency, and battled a dwindling economy. Yet, through all of these challenges they have continued—and even escalated—their fight against cultural racketeering. For six years I have followed the ups and downs of Egypt’s government, but have followed the threats to Egypt’s heritage and their efforts to combat them even more closely. And as the nation suffers from a variety of crises—including a dismaying drop in revenue generated by visits to archaeological sites—they push forward to protect the history that has defined their country, and our past, for millennia.

### **Homeward Bound**

Egypt is fighting to get its heritage back. And a wave of returns has begun to swell with the repatriation of artifacts that have been smuggled out of the country both before and after the revolution.

One post-Revolution case in particular that gained international attention was the [2012 seizure](#) of two Egyptian sarcophagi found in a Jerusalem antiquities shop. The items had been looted from Egypt following the security vacuum caused by the Arab Spring. This case didn’t gain attention for the size of the artifacts or the value they could bring to a dealer, but for the lengths that traffickers went to in order to get the objects out of Egypt. The painted wooden sarcophagi, described as “breathtaking” by the Israel Antiquities Authority, had been sawed in half so they could be smuggled in a suitcase. Deliberate damage of an artifact to such an extent is a tactic not often discussed in media when stories of illicit antiquities trafficking emerge.

The objects were returned to Egypt in 2016 by Israeli authorities, just two of several dozen repatriated by Israel since the 2011 revolution. I had the opportunity to speak to the conservators who are beginning the painstaking process of preserving and analyzing these beautiful sarcophagi tucked away in the conservation lab at the Egyptian Museum. The young conservators tasked with helping restore these artifacts were dismayed at the severity of the damage.

The looting and trafficking caused irreparable damage along with the loss of vital information that can lend clues as to whom these sarcophagi belonged and from where they came. Months of restoration are now in store for these breathtaking pieces.

But not all of Egypt's recovered objects are tucked away for restoration. Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities has worked tirelessly to repatriate artifacts stolen and trafficked overseas, recovering over [500 artifacts](#) in 2016 alone. In fact, they have repatriated so many artifacts in recent years that in early 2016, the Egyptian Museum hosted an entire [exhibition](#) dedicated to repatriated artifacts—the first of its kind in the country.

Egypt's collection of artifacts that have made their way home continues to grow. On December 1, a ceremony held at the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, DC marked the second repatriation of looted artifacts to Egypt from the U.S. in just two years. Since 2007, Egypt has seen dozens of artifacts returned from the United States thanks to the efforts of investigators at DHS ICE. But this repatriation by U.S. authorities was just one of a series of repatriations from around the world so far [this month](#).

### **Out of Egypt and Onto the Market**

Egypt's fight to protect its heritage both at home and abroad is not one that is only fought on the ground at archaeological sites or by [diplomats](#) behind closed doors, but also in the global art and antiquities market.

These artifacts being trafficked out of Egypt to be sold on the international antiquities market are not simply a few coins smuggled in the bags or pockets of individuals (although [that happens too](#)). These are large scale items which take immense effort and resources to move under the radar, often making their way through transit countries like [Israel](#), [Qatar](#), and the [UAE](#), or to major market regions like the [U.S.](#), [U.K.](#), and [Western Europe](#).

So how does an artifact on the scale of a sarcophagus make its way from the sands of Egypt to a place like a Brooklyn antiquities dealer's garage? With a significant amount of effort, resources, and knowledge of trafficking. The "Lady of the House" is but one example of the U.S. market as a harbinger of demand for illicit antiquities. The larger the object, the higher the risks of getting caught, high risks are often only undertaken with the chance for high reward. And with the U.S. now making up [43%](#) of the global art and antiquities market, there is ample opportunity for high rewards for dealers of illicit material in the United States. The "Operation Mummy's Curse" investigation alone has resulted in [\\$3 million](#) in antiquities seizures thus far.

While the global art and antiquities market has seen ups and downs over the past 5 years, the U.S. share of the global market has remained on a steady [incline](#) during that same time (2011 – [29%](#); 2012 – [33%](#); 2013- [38%](#); 2014- [39%](#); 2015- [43%](#)), even with overall downturn globally. With the U.S. art and antiquities market seeing its biggest share of the market over the past five years, it's clear that a high demand for art and antiquities remains. With the U.S. currently holding the largest share of the global market, collectors and dealers in the U.S. and regions that drive demand must remain vigilant in vetting artifacts from areas in crisis such as Egypt. .

As Egypt works to rebuild its devastated tourism industry and reinvigorate its economy, the return of Egypt's heritage is critical to filling the holes of the country's storied past that has been the draw for tourists for centuries. With the ramped up efforts to repatriate Egypt's heritage, we have yet to see what elements of the past the future may hold.

**Written by Katie A. Paul, [The Antiquities Coalition](#)**