

# Smithsonian.com

SmartNews Keeping you current

## Most Antiquities Sold Online Are Fake or Illegal

Social media and ISIS have combined to flood the web with thousands of questionable artifacts



(Wikimedia Commons)

By [Jason Daley](#)  
smithsonian.com  
November 3, 2017

If you're looking for a nice bust of a pharaoh for the patio or some Roman coins to fill out your collection, consider carefully who you choose to do business with. [Georgi Kantchev at \*The Wall Street Journal\*](#) reports that buying antiquities online is a risky proposition, with the majority of items for sale either counterfeits or illegally looted from archeological sites.

While fakes and looted artifacts have been a problem on the internet for a long time, two recent factors have combined to increase the problem. First, the proliferation of social media and retail platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, eBay, Amazon, WhatsApp and many others has made it simple for looters to directly solicit potential buyers, often sending messages to members of antiquities groups on Facebook and other sites. Second, ISIS has systematically looted the archaeological sites it has

taken over in the last half decade, producing an almost unlimited stream of antiquities that it sells directly over social media. The combination has flooded the internet with questionable antiquities.

Neil Brodie, senior research fellow in Endangered Archaeology at the University of Oxford, tells Kantchev that at any given time, there are at least 100,000 antiquities valued at \$10 million or more for sale on the internet. Up to 80 percent of those items are estimated to be either looted or fake.

“Social media democratized the art market, but it also democratized who can be victimized by the art market,” Colette Loll, founder of Art Fraud Insights, a company that investigates art fraud and runs prevention initiatives, tells [Julia Halperin at \*artnet News\*](#).

Loll says that the illegal sellers have become increasingly sophisticated, even offering works via Snapchat so the evidence of their looting automatically disappears.

In a [policy paper for the Antiquities Coalition](#) released in July, Brodie writes that the boom in the online antiquities trade has been a disaster for the field. “This means that minor archaeological sites or cultural institutions, which previously may not have been worth looting and thus left intact by criminals, can now be viewed in a more lucrative light and targeted accordingly,” he writes. “The resultant trade in small, portable, and easy to conceal antiquities is less likely to make headlines than that in major works of ancient art, but it is more difficult to police and arguably more destructive to the historical record.”

While the online platforms and police are attempting to shut down the illegal sales, be on the lookout for objects with telltale signs of looting—like uncleaned coins or an artifact with unclear provenance (the object’s trail of ownership history).

Alberto Rodao Martin, an officer who has run antiquities stings for Spain’s Civil Guard, gives perspective on how radically the field of safeguarding antiquities has changed in recent years. “Not long ago, our job involved watching looters with sniper binoculars in the bushes,” he tells Kantchev. “Now we’re looking at online ads.”

#### About Jason Daley

Jason Daley is a Madison, Wisconsin-based writer specializing in natural history, science, travel, and the environment. His work has appeared in *Discover*, *Popular Science*, *Outside*, *Men’s Journal*, and other magazines.

|