

Culture

ART



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Aleppo, Syria, was severely damaged by fighting between government forces and rebels in 2013. Aleppo's old city is listed as a Unesco World Heritage site for its wealth of historical buildings and mosques.

Growing alarm on cultural theft

BERLIN

Officials call for new laws to curb persistent demand in market for antiquities

BY ALISON SMALE

They have always been among the spoils of war, alluring in their beauty, tantalizing in their value to dealers, museums and collectors. And after a decade of turmoil, and a longer stretch of willful destruction, the world's antiquities are in such jeopardy that preservationists are sounding a screeching alarm.

At a gathering in Berlin last week, 250 experts discussed ways to help Syria, Iraq and Egypt, as well as Afghanistan and other threatened regions, protect cultural property.

But while the fighting in the region has been devastating to scores of heritage sites — decay, negligence and religious fervor also have taken a heavy toll — the destruction is also driven by the persistent demand for looted goods, European experts said.

Many participants called for tighten-

ing laws to make it more difficult for the very wealthy to acquire tangible bits of world history. Or, as the German commissioner for culture, Monika Grütters, put it, while proposing far-reaching new German curbs on the murky antiquities market, “the cultural heritage of all humanity” is something everyone should help preserve.

This month, Irina Bokova, the Bulgarian who heads Unesco, the United Nations' organization in Paris for education, science and culture, appealed for new curbs on billions of dollars earned illegally in antiquities. She wants a ban on such trade with Syria and Iraq, and urged the creation of culture safety zones in Syria, starting with the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo.

Emily K. Rafferty, the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, joined members of the Louvre, the Berlin Pergamon Museum and the British Museum to call in Paris for a fight against illicit trafficking and destruction.

Carrying off art treasures has long been part of war and the assertion of cultural superiority. The perhaps most well-known dispute flared anew this month when the British Museum — which has long asserted that the Parthenon frieze

taken from Greece in the early 19th century could not be returned to Athens or split up — lent one statue from it to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Russia itself has long refused to return to Germany art treasures seized by Soviet troops in World War II.

Germany, of course, has its own painful history of the Nazis confiscating art from mostly Jewish owners, and from museums. That, and the recent discovery of a trove of art amassed by a Nazi-

Germany may institute a new antiquities law. “There is no business if there are no buyers. Don't buy this stuff!”

era dealer and kept secret for decades by the dealer's reclusive son, Cornelius Gurlitt, have helped spur a proposal for what experts say would be the most far-reaching laws regulating the booming market in cultural property.

Ms. Grütters outlined plans for a new law that would require documented provenance for any object entering or leaving Germany, long among the laxest of regulators of the art market.

Among other measures, dealers would be required to show a valid export permit from the source of the piece's origins when entering Germany.

Countries like Switzerland, and European Union members like France, Italy and Britain, have in recent years considerably tightened their rules, and are now re-examining them.

Vincent Geerling, chairman of the International Association of Dealers in ancient art, insisted that “we don't need an extra German law.” Museums and serious collectors can police themselves, he suggested.

Yet the German proposal could be “a big step,” said Neil Brodie, an antiquities expert at the Scottish Center for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow. “In a way, the United States was the most advanced” in curbing illicit trade in cultural goods, through five-year, renewable agreements with about a dozen affected countries, he said. “But the Germans are now looking to go one step further,” he said. “You don't just have to prove something is not guilty, but show that it is innocent.”

The first global attempt to regulate the antiquities trade was a Unesco convention of 1970, now signed by 127 nations.

But implementation depends on national governments, and the 1970 date has fed what Egypt's culture minister, Mamdouh Mohamed Eldamaty, called “antiquities laundering.” Like money launderers, he said, dealers scramble to prove objects left his country — or any other — before 1970, and can thus be legally traded.

Over all, many experts blame illicit cultural deals on the desire of wealthy people to have an ancient piece of culture to boast about.

“There is no business if there are no buyers,” said France Desmarais, a Canadian expert with the International Museum Conference in Paris, which has 33,000 members worldwide. “Don't buy this stuff!” At a lecture, Mr. Brodie took cases from Italy in the 1990s, India and New York from 2010 and Cambodia in 2009 to illustrate his charge that perhaps 95 percent of dealings in the international antiquities market are tainted by crime.

One step needed to curtail such trade, he suggested, is to focus on experts who perhaps unwittingly lend their knowledge to serve what he called organized crime — defined by the United Nations as a structure of at least three people who band together to break the law.

“These experts are operating without

any thought to being criminally involved,” he said. “I think this is a choke point. I think these people would be quite easy to deter.” He suggested that social media have helped in the case of Syria to sound immediate alarms, because people post evidence of looting on Facebook or Twitter almost as it occurs. But other experts suggested that the presence of foreigners can signal to cultural criminals where the treasures are.

Once European archaeologists leave a site in Afghanistan, for example, illicit dealers move in, alerted to the presence of potential treasure, said Christian Manhart, a veteran of Unesco, who has long experience with Afghanistan and is now based in Nepal, trying to stem a fresh flow of cultural theft.

Mr. Manhart, addressing the Berlin conference, at one point showed a slide of Afghans at an antiquity site under a banner written in Dari and English — “A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive.”

“We should all meditate on that,” he said.

DESTRUCTION OF SYRIA'S PATRIMONY
A look at the damage to Syria's heritage in By the Numbers. [PAGE 12](#)

Bacchic revelry and Baroque art in Rome's seamy underside

ROME

A bohemian epicenter of 17-century debauchery and drunkenness

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Caravaggio's revolutionary realist style of painting rapidly found followers and imitators among Rome's community of painters, who flocked there from all over Europe to immerse themselves in Greco-Roman art, study the Italian

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Renaissance masters and seek commissions from the city's wealthy ecclesiastical elite, local and foreign residents and visitors.

Most of Caravaggio's works were religious in theme and only a few, such as “The Fortune Teller” and “The Card Sharps,” were genre paintings, but the eagerness with which his patrons acquired such canvases (Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte bought both these works) encouraged his contemporaries in Rome — and not only

those painting in the new Caravaggesque manner — to depict the dark side of the Eternal City.

Caravaggio had a notoriously racy lifestyle, which ultimately led in May 1606 to his fatal wounding of an opponent in a brawl, his flight from justice and his tragically early death in exile two years later. This kind of disorderly existence was by no means uncommon among Rome's artists at the time and their experience of the city's seamy side fueled a new artistic interest in poor and lowlife scenes and characters — as is vividly illustrated in “The Baroque Underworld: Vice and Destitution in Rome,” at the Villa Medici in Rome.

This exhibition of over 50 paintings, drawings and engravings, the first of its kind to examine the subject, is curated by Francesca Cappelletti and Annick Lemoine, and continues in Rome until Jan. 18, before traveling on to the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris in February.

Rome's artists' guild, the Accademia di San Luca (of which Cardinal Del Monte became patron in 1596), dates to the late 15th century, but the diverse, cosmopolitan nature of Rome's artistic population gave rise to other more informal groups. Most prominent of these

was the Bentvueghels (Birds of a Feather), whose Flemish name reflected the fact that it was dominated by Flemish and Dutch artists, but there were also members and associates of other nationalities, such as Valentin de Boulogne and Nicolas Régnier, as well as local Italian artists who contributed to the group's often unruly activities.

Indeed, the so-called Bent became a bohemian epicenter of drunkenness and debauchery. Their presiding deity was Bacchus, inventor of wine and god of both liquid and artistic inspiration. The exhibition opens with several celebratory images of Bacchus, including the Caravaggesque “Bacchus and a Drinker” by Bartolomeo Manfredi and Dirck van Baburen's “Pan,” almost certainly a self-portrait of the artist in the guise of this Greek deity famed for both his music and sexual prowess.

Further paintings and engravings by Matthys Pool depict the elaborate, wine-sodden initiation rites of the Bent, which ended in a solemn procession at dawn to the “Tomb of Bacchus,” an ancient porphyry sarcophagus in Santa Costanza, where further imbibing and libations took place, along with the carving of the name of the new member on the walls of the church (some of

these names being still legible today).

These works are accompanied by lively sketches of contemporary Bent artists, attributed to Leonaert Bramer and another — anonymous — Dutchman. Their subjects included Claude Lorrain, capacious wine glass in hand, and the Italian Caravaggesque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, dressed as a male and sporting a false mustache.

There is a comically unflattering oil self-portrait of the Dutch painter Pieter Boddhing van Laer, a prominent member of the Bent, who moonlighted as a barman and was known for spending everything he earned on prostitutes. Van Laer's exotically hideous visage earned him the nickname “il Bamboccio” (the ugly doll or baby). He was a notable painter of lowlife Roman subjects in the 1620s, his followers in due course being dubbed the “Bamboccianti” (though this appellation did not appear in inventories until the end of the 17th century).

A riotous nocturnal scene, “Bentvueghels in a Roman Tavern” by Pieter van Laer's brother Roeland, which appears to represent a debauch on the occasion of an initiation, includes a prostitute stretched out on the floor in parody of a pose in which Mary Mag-BACCHUS, [PAGE 12](#)

Simon Vouet's “Gypsy With a Baby,” painted in about 1625, is like a Roman Madonna and Child.



COLLEZIONE KOELLIKER, MILAN