ARTS 481: Small Classical Bronzes in the Picker Art Gallery: Looting, Faking and Collecting Antiquities in the Post-Colonial World

Wednesdays, 1:20-4:00 pm, 201 Little

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Office hours:
Tues, 3:00 – 4:30, Thurs, 3:00 – 3:45
and by appointment

This seminar will explore a collection of classical bronzes currently housed in the Picker Art Gallery but still belonging to a prominent New York antiquities dealer. There are two defining features of these objects: they are very beautiful, and they lack provenance (that is, any information about where they were found and/or the history of their ownership before they were purchased by the dealer). Archaeologists, who study ancient works as cultural artifacts, would probably tell us that these bronzes, with their complete lack of contextual information, are essentially worthless as historical documents; and that any highly marketable antiquity without a known archaeological findspot might well be a forgery. Many art historians, on the other hand, have argued that the well-trained eye can always spot a forgery, and that most of what we want to know about ancient artworks can be gleaned by carefully studying the object itself (a historical method known as connoisseurship). This divide between art historians and archaeologists has recently deepened (and received much media attention) in the wake of a number of high-profile cases involving antiquities believed to have been stolen from their original countries through illegal excavation (looting). These include the prosecution of a prominent curator at the Getty Museum and the repatriation back to Italy of one of the most famous vases in the Metropolitan Museum, not to mention the ongoing controversy surrounding the Elgin Marbles.

This course will examine the epistemological and ethical problems inherent in the study and collecting of unprovenanced antiquities through the case study of the Picker bronzes. Each student will carry out independent research on two objects to determine just how much can be said about them as historical objects (what do they represent? are they similar to other ancient objects? when might they have been made? how? for what possible purpose?). For their final papers, students will analyze the thorny situation in which the Picker now finds itself with regard to these pieces: what should be done with them? Should they be returned to the dealer? Should they be displayed? If so, how? To what end? In addition to broad issues of cultural property and repatriation, we will examine in particular the complicated relationships between museums, academia and the art market.
Grade distribution:

Participation: 15%
5-minute presentation (9/17): 10%
20-minute presentation (10/29): 20%
30-minute presentation (12/3): 25%
20-25 page paper (due 12/10): 30%

Schedule of Classes

1) Sept. 3: The Royal Athena Bronzes (meet in gallery!)
   • www.royalathena.com: thoroughly explore this website.

2) Sept. 10: Small Bronzes in the Ancient Mediterranean; Library Resources
   • Joan R. Mertens, “The human figure in classical bronze-working: some perspectives,” in Small bronze sculpture from the ancient world: papers delivered at a symposium organized by the ... the J. Paul Getty Museum (Malibu: Getty Museum, 1989). (on course reserve)
   • Look through the Gods Delight and Fire of Hephaistos exhibition catalogues, and find the objects that are most similar to yours. Use them as a starting point for your research. NB: make xeroxes of the relevant entries in the Fire of Hephaistos, as this book does not belong to Colgate and will be returned on 9/18.

3) Sept. 17: History from Objects
   • Choose one of the following monuments and do enough reading on it to be able to present it to the class for five minutes, placing particular emphasis on how its archaeological findspot (or lack thereof) informs our understanding (or lack thereof) of the work: Palaikastro kouroi; Sagalassos Hadrian; Vergina ivory head of Philip; Vix krater; Lefkandi centaur; Motya Charioteer; Mask of Agamemnon; Sevso Treasure.

4) Sept. 24: Post-Colonial and Archaeological Critiques of Collecting
• Neil Brodie, Jenny Doole and Peter Watson, *Stealing History. The Illicit Trade in Cultural Material* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2000), 8-29, 43-59 (online)

5) Oct. 1: The Historian’s Critique of Collecting: Cycladica

6) Oct. 8: The Debate today
• Kate Taylor, “Shelby White in Center Court and the Met,” *New York Sun*, May 1, 2007.

7) Oct. 15: meet in the gallery to have one more look at your objects

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17: TRIP TO NYC
visit the new Greek and Roman Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ariadne Gallery and the home of antiquities-collector Roy Lenox

8) Oct. 22: Visit to the studio of bronze sculptor, John von Bergen
• Beryl Barr-Sharrar, “How important is provenance? Archeological and stylistic questions in the attribution of ancient bronzes,” in *Small bronze sculpture from the ancient world: papers delivered at a symposium organized by the … the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu: Getty Museum, 1989).
• George Ortiz, “Connoisseurship and antiquity,” in *Small bronze sculpture from the ancient world: papers delivered at a symposium organized by the … the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu: Getty Museum, 1989).

9) Oct. 29: Presentations on Objects; meet in gallery!

10) Nov. 5: Elgin Marbles
11) Nov. 12: The “Universal” Museum


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12) Nov. 19: University Museums, Scholars and the Art Market


13) Dec. 3: Presentations

14) Dec. 10: Presentations