

Looting's Devastating Legacy

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Over the course of world history, there has been destruction and plunder of some of the world's greatest monuments and works of art during times of war. As evidenced by the current looting of Iraqi museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, this continues to be a devastating problem.

Hundreds of years ago, the demolition and robbery of works of art was considered an acceptable and expected practice of soldiers. Through time, people came to understand the paramount importance of cultural property for people and to a nation's identity. As a result, in the last century a number of international conventions have been signed and ratified, and several bilateral agreements have been agreed to in this regard.

Notwithstanding legal progress, the primitive impulses of our ancestors seem to have persisted. According to reports, despite several conversations the Bush administration had with art historians and archaeological experts about the need to protect Iraqi cultural artworks in the event of war, American troops were completely unprepared for carrying out such protection, and indeed, allowed it to go on. This transpired despite the fact that under the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954, states are obliged to "prohibit, prevent and if necessary, put a stop to" any form of illegal seizure or vandalism of cultural property. (The United States has never become one of the 103 countries to be a party to this convention, however)

In ancient times, the destruction and looting, of cultural property of vanquished states was common practice. For example, when the Romans defeated the Greeks in the second century, B.C., they looted without mercy an immense amount of cultural property from the defeated states. They did this triumphantly and gloried in it, considering it a right of conquest. Indeed, such loot was paraded in the triumphal procession that took place upon the conqueror's return to Rome.

The Crusaders of the 13th Century destroyed hundred of works of art and committed plunder in a manner never before known to Europe, amassing ultimately a fortune in cultural property. During medieval times, plunder in a just war was considered a right of combatants. Thus, in conflicts of this period, such as the Thirty Years War, there was widespread devastation and plunder of cultural property.

The Napoleonic wars were the first time in history that plunder was part of an organized, systematic campaign. Napoleon was the first in history to attempt to assert a positive right to plunder legally by including it in the armistices he signed with the vanquished parties in Italy.

By World War I the international community recognized that protection of cultural property against looting must be provided for and guardians of art were attached to military units. Nonetheless, both sides wreaked massive destruction of historical monuments and the contents of museums. Russian troops also engaged in widespread plunder.

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Despite this history, no one could have been prepared for the level of abuse committed by the Nazis during World War II. Despite easily refuted claims made afterward that such works were taken for protective purposes, the true reasons were to obtain a stable mode of economic currency and enrich Germany; to have an extra lever of pressure during treaty negotiations; and probably most of all, to completely demoralize the peoples of the occupied countries.

The Tribunal at Nuremberg found the Nazis systematically stole some of the greatest art works known to humankind. Numerous documents revealed at Nuremberg confirmed that such seizures were not conducted for protecting the properties, as the Nazis asserted, but were for the enrichment of Germany and the universal promulgation of German culture.

When the Allied armies swept into Germany in 1945, the Soviets viewed trophy-hunting as just compensation for Hitler's treachery. In addition to reclaiming whatever Soviet treasures they could find, the Red Army snatched an estimated 2 million other objects from German castles, museums and storage bunkers, including masterpieces by Goya, Rembrandt, El Greco and Cezanne. American soldiers also engaged in theft of artwork and other valuables throughout Europe and the Pacific.

The looters themselves may have been incited by both revenge and poverty. But given what we know about what has historically been behind this type of activity during armed conflict, what do we make of the American military allowing the looting of Iraqi institutions? What was the thinking, despite offering assurances to the contrary, of the military leadership in having no plan to stop such activity?

Regardless of what may be innocent reasons for this turn of events, the message it sends is that we do not value your culture. It is not worthy of our protection. Just as our forbears, we give the appearance of using Iraqi institutions of art to make a statement of our victory. The West has won. American values have prevailed. Even if that sentiment was not intended, given the context in which this war came about, that will be its unfortunate and even dangerous affect.

The idea that American values are best for everyone in the world is not even the issue that this action raises. No doubt in the minds of many around the world, the real issue is what such action indicates about this administration's view of other nations and cultures, and what this means for what they do next.

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