

eBay has unexpected, chilling effect on looting of antiquities, archaeologist finds

May 4 2009



The daughter of a Peruvian artisan who specializes in the production of fake antiquities holds up an example.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Having worked for 25 years at fragile archaeological sites in Peru, UCLA archaeologist Charles "Chip" Stanish held his breath when the online auction house eBay launched more than a decade ago.

"My greatest fear was that the Internet would democratize antiquities trafficking, which previously had been a wealthy person's vice, and lead to widespread looting," said the UCLA professor of [anthropology](#), who directs the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

Indeed, [eBay](#) has drastically altered the transporting and selling of illegal [artifacts](#), Stanish writes in an article in the May/June issue of

Archaeology, but not in the way he and other archaeologists had feared.

By improving access to a worldwide market, eBay has inadvertently created a vast market for copies of antiquities, diverting whole villages from looting to producing fake artifacts, Stanish writes. The proliferation of these copies also has added new risks to buying objects billed as artifacts, which in turn has worked to depress the market for these items, further reducing incentives to loot.

"For most of us, the Web has forever distorted the antiquities trafficking market in a positive way," Stanish said.

Looting, which is illegal, is widely recognized as destructive to cultural heritage because it can remove from public ownership tangible links to a people's past. In addition, looting is perceived as the enemy of scholarship because it typically is done without regard to any appropriate methods that allow scientists to date objects and to place them in a larger, more meaningful context.

One of the world's premiere authorities on Andean archaeology and supervisor, at UCLA, of the one of the world's largest collections of working archaeologists, Stanish has been tracking objects billed as antiquities on eBay for more than nine years. His conclusions also are informed by experiences with the U.S. customs service, which occasionally asks him to authenticate objects. In addition, Stanish has visited a number of workshops in Peru and Bolivia that specialize in reproductions of pottery and has interviewed these artisans. While his background is in South American archaeology, he has tracked eBay listings of antiquities from many cultures.

"Chinese, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Peruvian and Mexican workshops are now producing fakes at a frenetic pace," he writes.

When he first started tracking eBay's sales of antiquities, Stanish focused mainly on objects related to his field. At the time, the ratio of real artifacts to fakes was about 50-50, he estimates. About five years later, 95 percent were fakes. Now, he admits, he can't always tell, because the quality of the fakes has improved so much.

He estimates that about 30 percent of "antiquities" currently for sale on eBay are obvious fakes, in so much as creators mix up iconography and choose colors and shapes for visual effect rather than authenticity. Another 5 percent or so are genuine treasures. The rest fall in the ambiguous "I would have to hold it in my hand to be able to make an informed decision" category, he writes. Stanish admits himself to occasionally being duped by fakes encountered in shops in areas where both looted items and fakes are sold.

The advent of eBay has had the biggest impact on the antiquities market by reducing the incentive to unearth precious treasures in the first place, Stanish has found.

"People who used to make a few dollars selling a looted artifact to a middleman in their village can now produce their own 'almost-as-good-as-old' objects and go directly to a person in a nearby town who has an eBay account," he said. "They will receive the same amount or even more than they could have received for actual antiquities."

As a result of the rise of a ready market, many of the primary purveyors have shifted from looting sites to faking antiquities.

In addition to linking craftsmen with a market for cheap fakes, eBay has tended to have a depressing effect on prices for real looted artifacts, further discouraging locals from pillaging precious sites.

"The value of ... illicit digging decreases every time someone buys a

'genuine' Moche pot for \$35, plus shipping and handling," he writes. (An authentic antiquity would sell for upwards of \$15,000.)

So far, authentication techniques have struggled to keep abreast of increasingly sophisticated fakes, Stanish said. Pottery can still be authenticated reliably, although the process is costly. In addition, forgers tend to only guarantee the authenticity of their pieces as long as no form of "destructive" analysis is used. While just a tiny flake of pottery is required for thermoluminescence dating — the gold standard for pottery — the process is technically considered destructive, Stanish points out, so the test invalidates such warranties, no matter its conclusion.

Thanks to laser technology and chemical processes for forming antique-appearing patinas, stone and metal, reproductions are "almost impossible" to authenticate using today's technology, Stanish writes. However, the prospect of authentication techniques eventually catching up with today's fakes is also having a chilling effect on the market for antiquities, by dramatically adding to the risk of illicit, high-end trafficking.

"Who wants to spend \$50,000 on an object 'guaranteed' to be ancient by today's standards, when someone can come along in five years with a new technology that definitively proves it to be a fake," he asks.

Archaeology is a publication of the Archaeological Institute of America, North America's oldest and largest organization devoted to the world of archaeology.

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Citation: eBay has unexpected, chilling effect on looting of antiquities, archaeologist finds (2009,

May 4) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-ebay-unexpected-chilling-effect-looting.html>

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