

COMMENTARY

Museums' Dirty Little Secret

Displaying looted artifacts is a U.S. disgrace.

By Roger Atwood

Next week, workers at the National Gallery of Art in Washington will begin packing up 142 ancient artifacts from the exhibition "Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya" and trucking them across the country to San Francisco. There, at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the pieces will be unwrapped and put back on display starting in September. No one should miss the show — you'll see some dazzling examples of Mayan sculpture and painting originally from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, but you'll also get a peek at one of American museums' biggest ethical failings: their ownership and display of looted antiquities.

Museums don't like to call attention to it, but many of the ancient artifacts in their collections are what curators delicately call "unprovenanced" — that is, they don't know where the pieces came from because they were removed from their original "find-spot" unscientifically, at best, or illegally, at worst. It's not a new problem. For generations, looters and grave robbers have dug up treasures in China, Turkey, Peru or other countries with a rich ancient heritage and sold the pieces to middlemen, who sold them to American collectors. Eventually, museums acquired the best of the artworks. In most but not all cases, these acts of plunder occurred years ago, before laws banning the import of pillaged goods into the U.S. went into effect in 1983.

It's difficult for a foreign country to prove that an American museum has illegally looted artifacts in its collection and to get them back. In the 34 years since a groundbreaking international treaty was signed in 1970, aimed at combating the black market in antiquities, it has happened no more than half a dozen times. But regardless of what the law requires, when museums show these pieces to the public they should be honest about their likely origin: looters.

The difference between artifacts excavated through the slow, meticulous process of archeology and those dug up by looters will be particularly clear in the Maya exhibition. There is, for example, a set of carved pieces of flint. Three were excavated by archeologists at the ruins of Copán in Honduras. Archeologists know precisely where the Maya left these exquisite, richly symbolic pieces — beneath a stone staircase carved with hieroglyphs inside a temple complex — and what their purpose was; these flints were seen as a kind of lightning rod, propitiation to the god K'awiil. And they can be dated — to the year 755.

Three other flints in the same case are a mystery. They're marked "provenance unknown." The curators guess that they were made between 600 and 800 AD. Next to the first three flints, with their abundant documentation, these three are a little like lost luggage. Did they come from a temple? A tomb? A dwelling? We will never know.

Pillage of ancient sites destroys the chance to learn more about the ancient world. When places are excavated by trained archeologists, all of humanity can gain knowledge on how people in history lived, what they valued, how they worshiped. Almost everything we know about ancient life has been gained this way. When sites are ransacked by looters looking for only a few valuable artifacts, all the context, and all that knowledge, is lost.

Looting has been a particularly pernicious force in the Mayan lands, a fact never mentioned in the Maya exhibit. Except perhaps for the Etruscan culture of central Italy, no other ancient civilization has been hit so hard by the illicit antiquities trade. In the 1960s, museums including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and the Cleveland Museum of Art acquired Mayan stone carvings that had been freshly cut from a major temple complex known only to looters. Archeologists could tell the carvings came from the same site because the hieroglyphs on them said so. By the time they tracked down the site, on the Mexico-Guatemala border, it had been dismantled by looters, its treasures chopped up and dispersed among museums, dealers and private collectors all over America and Europe.

By my count, 47 of the 142 pieces on display in the Maya show no record of archeological discovery. That means they could have come from any one of hundreds of sites spread over five countries looted for the antiquities trade. What a shame that the National Gallery and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which organized the show, included objects that they must also suspect were looted or hacked off standing monuments. They could have made a powerful statement in favor of science by keeping this exhibit focused exclusively on artifacts found by archeologists, as other major shows of ancient art have done recently.

Or at least the organizers might have offered visitors a frank admission of what they're looking at: "The objects in this display case were looted from ancient sites." Instead, we're looking at pillage elevated to the level of art. They're not the same, and they shouldn't be treated the same.

Roger Atwood is author of "Stealing History: Tomb Raiders, Smugglers, and the Looting of the Ancient World," out in November from St. Martin's Press.