

Some ethical dilemmas museums face in teaching children about the illicit trade of antiquities

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Many museum programs world-wide teach children the importance of archaeology, like a detective-like story inspired by “Indiana Jones” or organize exhibitions on the identification of fakes and forgers in the spirit of “X-files”, but they usually avoid dealing with the “real” problem of illicit trafficking of antiquities. The hesitation of promoting this sensitive topic, especially by museums in the West, may be due to the fact that many objects in their collections were either donated by private collectors or bought from the art market, and it is difficult for museums to face their history and inform the public. Today, the question of ownership in Cultural Heritage can be controversial with political overtures – and for this reason the term cultural property is being replaced by the term Cultural Heritage. The ICOM Code of Ethics advises against displaying or otherwise using material of questionable origin or lacking provenance, but most museums do house antiquities which have unknown provenances.

The paper will explore how museums can begin to discuss this difficult issue about the origin of their collections, using the materials produced by an on-going European Culture Project “Witness the Past”. The project's main objective is to create film documentaries and a didactic kit aimed at children on the topic of illicit trade of antiquities, with the main focus to take place at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo and its Children's Museum, the National Museum of Berlin, the Pierides Museum of Cyprus, and at the Benaki Museum of Greece. Furthermore, through complementary cultural products and educational kits, the influence of science in understanding of an object's technological past is also considered as opposed to just highlighting the aesthetic value of an archaeological artifact.

Public awareness campaigns whether for children or adults needs to approach artifacts that make up a museum collection with the goal to sensitize the public to

the historical loss involved with artifacts without provenance, similar to the trend today with public campaigns that are against the production of items made of ivory or fur. Educational programs that help to create a public stigma against artifacts without provenance collected or bought after the 1970 UNESCO Convention needs to be a goal of museums that support International Conventions and ICOM Code of Ethics.