


Tomb raiders

Arts and antiquities stolen from museums in the UK and even gravesites and archaeological sites throughout the world sometimes end up being channelled through dealers who sell them on to private collectors. Phil Chamberlain reports on how the Met's Art and Antiques Unit tackles the trade.

 When it comes to the search for ancient antiquities then forget Indiana Jones or Lara Croft. Think instead about the Italian *tombatori*.

These are poor laborers who earn pin money by raiding tombs for relics, which are eventually sold overseas to museums, and private collectors for thousands of pounds. Almost every country has its own *tombatori*, stripping sites of treasure to feed a ready market in the west.

The trade in illicit antiquities hit the headlines after the invasion of Iraq when there was a concern over the looting of its museums. But Iraq is only the tip of the iceberg.

Last November Professor Robin Coningham, from the University of Bradford, reported that 90 per cent of major archaeological sites in Pakistan and Iran have been looted, much of it channelled through London.

The value of this trade has not been established but runs into the hundreds of millions and is increasingly attracting the attention of organised crime.

The Metropolitan Police's Art and Antiques Unit is responsible for tackling the trade.

Det Sgt Vernon Rapley, who heads the four-strong unit, says the capital is full of antiquities 'trampolining' between different dealers.

'They just go from one dealer to another and effectively they are cleansed before they go to America,' he says.

The unit is in regular contact with Interpol, which acts as a



The illicit trade in cultural objects is far from the Indiana Jones films

clearing house for information, the FBI and other foreign police forces. It also benefits from a network of experts in London who can advise detectives.

In this country the unit sits on a steering group organised by the Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS), with Customs as well as the trade and academics to co-ordinate effective action.

However, it is difficult to track down objects once they have made their way past Customs and disappear among the warren of dealers who see no benefit in questioning too closely a particular item's provenance.

Meanwhile, for Customs, their top priority is combating drugs problems and for police forces, since cultural property crime is something they do not have to meet targets on, there is little incentive to put resources into it.

Det Sgt Rapley said: 'Some forces have now let their officers, who we liaise with, lapse. We are looking to rebuild that network.'

'We also run training courses

for these officers but in the last couple of years budget constraints have curtailed them. Hopefully we can get private funding to run them again.'

The situation is unsurprising when Government direction is generally considered slothful and haphazard.

A Parliamentary select committee report from 2003 found there was a worrying lack of an overall strategy, adding: 'The systems, resources and co-ordination across different agencies for checking both imports and exports seem deeply unsatisfactory.'

One example of this lack of strategic direction is the establishment of a national database of stolen or tainted cultural objects. It was recommended by a select committee in 2000, sought by the trade and academics and promised by both the Home Office and the DCMS.

The idea was that traders could check the legitimacy of an object they were handling by consulting the database.

Last year, after being bogged

down in inter-departmental wrangling, the Government quietly shelved it after an independent appraisal concluded it would not have been effective.

There is some justification for this, however, the Government's handling of the issue infuriated experts.

The Government also seems to be flying in the face of expert thinking when it comes to the link between the trade and organised crime.

The Government says the link is unproven but Det Sgt Rapley believes there is no doubt that gangs have moved into the area.

'If you have some Roman coins in the boot of your car and you are stopped at a border it's unlikely the customs officer will know what they are and if you say they're worth a few hundreds of pounds they'll probably believe you.'

'You're unlikely to be caught, and if you are the penalties aren't as severe.'

For criminals moving large amounts of cash the benefits of transferring that into objects less likely to arouse suspicion are obvious.

According to Dr David Gill, from the University of Wales Swansea and an expert in the stolen antiquities trade, the routes from Turkey up through the Balkans to northern Europe used to transport guns, drugs and people are also being used to ferry looted cultural objects.

The Government's approach to regulating the multi-billion pound art and antiquities trade has been

to let it police itself. Unfortunately, nobody outside the industry believes it works.

In 2003 Britain announced that it would rigorously enforce UN sanctions which made it illegal to deal in Iraqi cultural objects and for any items of dubious provenance to be declared. Since then just two objects have been declared.

The suspicion is that in anonymous lock-ups around Heathrow are crates of treasures waiting to come back onto the market once the UN sanctions lapse.

The market itself says it is keen to abide by the law. In evidence to the select committee James Ede, chairman of the Antiquities Dealers Association, said: 'The vast majority of dealers do not want to handle stolen goods.'

'The vast majority of dealers are trying to make a living, and if you give them the tools and at the same time show them that it would be very difficult to sell anything that could be demonstrated to be stolen, you have done the job. What we do not need is masses more bureaucracy and masses more police and masses more laws. We have the strongest laws that there are in the world.'

So what are these laws, which Mr Ede says, are so strong?

Aside from the UN sanctions, which are specifically aimed at Iraq objects and will lapse at some point, the Government has made two high profile efforts to give the police the powers, if not the resources, to stem the trade.

In 2002 it signed the 1970 Unesco convention on illicit cultural property and in 2003 it backed a private members bill which became the Dealing in Cultural Objects Act.

The then culture minister Kim Howells said: 'The Government is determined to do whatever it can to help Iraq and its people - and nations around the world - to recover their heritage, their culture and their pride.'

However no-one appears to have actually been successfully prosecuted under the Act which the police and CPS consider inadequate.

What they are increasingly



Objects stolen from a London art gallery during a night time raid. A painting of daffodils in a vase by Cyril Mann (1964) stolen from a London art gallery during a night time raid. Valued at £10,000 A bronze bust of Degas from a very limited edition, stolen from the same London art gallery. Valued in excess of £20,000.

making use of is the Proceeds of Crime Act to seize objects. Since this was brought in to strip major criminals of their assets it seems to further evidence of the link with organised crime.

Cindy Ho, from the American pressure group Saving Antiquities for Everyone, called the actions taken so far 'laudable' but added: 'The UK should make it known to

those countries that are most affected by looting and have also ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention that the UK is open to negotiating bilateral treaties similar to those signed by the US. For example, trade in Khmer artefacts in the US dropped dramatically after the US signed a bilateral treaty with Cambodia in 2003.'

No-one has come up with a

value for the illicit trade that everyone agrees on with anything between £200 million and £1 billion cited.

However, Det Sgt Rapley said: 'It is definitely profitable. Stuff is being picked out of the ground for 30 or 40 pence and being sold eventually for £3,000 or £4,000.'

Dr Gill points out that Sotherby's antiquities sales alone in 2004 totalled more than £11m. An analysis of just the Egyptian items Sotherby's has handled since 1998 showed only two per cent could definitely be linked to an audited excavation.

The primary demand which is feeding this trade comes from American museums and private collectors.

Dr Neil Brodie, from the McDonald Illicit Antiquities Research Centre at Cambridge University, said: 'The art museums in the US missed the colonial boat at the end of the 19th century and new museums are opening all the time and they need to acquire collections.'

'If you go to museums and ask to see their China collections they'll bring it out for you but if you ask for their acquisition records the door will be slammed in your face.'

'It is all secret and there needs to be transparency.'

Dr Gill says academics need to review their own ethical procedures and not authenticate items brought to them by dealers who can't prove their provenance. The other factor fuelling the demand is the internet.

A quick search on eBay reveals a seller from Lebanon trying to offload a hoard of coins from the Byzantium empire for around \$1,000. He has already completed more than 5,000 other sales. It's just one small example among many and if policing physical sales is difficult then online regulation is negligible.

Richard Allan, the former MP whose private members bill became the Dealing in Cultural Objects Act, said: 'Customs and police agendas are set by politicians and I can't really see politicians putting this issue at the top of their agenda in this parliament.'

