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Commercialization in Archaeology: Problems, Old and New

Ann C. Bauermeister

Archeology has long enjoyed popularity among the public. Such interest is an asset to the discipline, for it can generate the support integral to the profession and to the study of the archeological record. Unfortunately, the allure of archeology also has the potential to be destructive to the archeological record. When archeology is viewed as a hobby is when problems can--and do--arise. The term "amateur archeologist" has been applied to nonprofessional or untrained persons who pursue archeological work. Why our profession is thought of as one where amateurs are welcome is not entirely clear, though perhaps it is due in part due to how archeology has been romanticized through entertainment mediums. This paper addresses the current situation regarding collectors or "amateur archeologists". More specifically it focuses on the commercialization of antiquities, the problem with fake and replicate artifacts, and finally the role that the Internet now plays.

Commercialization of artifacts is not a new problem. It is however, a growing problem. Archeologists have dealt or not dealt with this issue for decades. The current state of buying and selling of artifacts, namely Native American Indian antiquities demands serious attention. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to distinguish between those items that were made with the intent to sell from those that are antiquities. Archeological resources, as defined in the Archeological Resource Protection Act (1979) are defined as: any material remains of past human life or activities which are of archaeological interest...these include, but are not limited to: pottery, basketry, bottles, weapons, weapon projectiles, tools, structures or portions of structures, pit houses, rock paintings, rock carvings, intaglios, graves, human skeletal materials, or any portion or piece of any of the foregoing items.

This paper is concerned with these items. The following narrative presents information related to the illegal buying and selling of artifacts. It focuses primarily on Native American Indian artifacts that fit the criteria for archeological resources. Three main topics will be explored. First, what is the role of the artifact collector and what is the extent he is contributing to the destruction of the archeological record? Second, what effect, if any are fake and replicate artifacts having on the integrity of archeology? And lastly, how does the ease and access of the Internet perpetuate the commercialization of artifacts.

[Dis]Concerning Collectors

As a common public resource, information from the archeological record should be shared. This should be done in ways that will not jeopardize the resource. The public has the right to access archeological information. This right has also been abused by parts of the public, in turn, causing adverse effects both to the resource and the general state of archeology. Both the need and legal basis to protect sites exist, and they exist for a reason. Damage to resources caused by nonprofessional collecting of artifacts has been recognized as one such reason. Context is key is to the integrity of any artifact. When an artifact is

removed from its context, the informational value is notably diminished. Formal and standardized excavation practices employed in archaeology today rely on the concept of contextual relevance. Archaeologists are emphasizing analytical processes, reporting, and curation of recovered artifacts. These factors are integral to realizing the full potential of the archaeological record.

Even at the most innocent amateur level, collectors are adversely impacting the cultural resource that yields artifacts. When an artifact is stripped of its provenience it loses most of its value as an interpretive tool to understanding the past. Even when amateur collectors do pay attention to location, often times their collections and information concerning those collections become displaced and the materials become merely objects. David Kuhn, a self-identified amateur Ohio archeologist and proponent for collecting, recently had this to say on the matter. "One way in which amateurs participate in the study of archaeology is through the acquisition, ownership and transfer of prehistoric artifacts and other material from one person to another. What better way to document the provenience and authenticity of an artifact than to have it publicly displayed and described on an auction card" (Kuhn 1999:53). This attitude is opposed by most professional archaeologists. In fact, the rift between amateurs and professionals has grown considerably over the last twenty years, making attempts to work together more difficult (Richner, 1999 personal communication).

The loss of information is only exacerbated when money is introduced. As the worth of artifact collections is being recognized, more collections are being sold. With each exchange lies the potential for loss or disregard of information. The market for artifacts also has the potential to encourage collecting and even to promote looting (Harrington 1991). It should be noted that not all collectors do so with the intent to disrupt the archeological record or to profit from artifacts, in fact many are not aware that what they are doing may be inappropriate. Unfortunately, many collectors are very serious collectors, and artifacts to them mean money. American Indian Art Magazine recently reported:

> *Old Barn Auction continues its impressive series of prehistoric sales featuring the collection of the late Colonel Raymond C. Vietzen, Elyria, Ohio. The fifth session on May 15 fetched $215,248 and the sixth session on July 10 made $235,367, bringing the Vietzen current total to $1,777,652 (1999:20).*

In a recent response to this dilemma, the Society for American Archaeology has included in its Principles of Archaeological Ethics, Principle No. 3: *Commercialization.* Part of the principle states:

> *"The commercialization of archaeological objects—their use as commodities to be exploited for personal enjoyment of profit—results in the destruction of archaeological sites and of contextual information that is essential to understanding the archaeological record" (Lynott 1997:592).*

The archeological record, as noted in these principles, "is irreplaceable" (ibid.). Though just one component of the archeological record, artifacts are visible, tangible objects, which makes them obtainable. According to the Archeological Resource Protection Act (ARPA) of 1979:

> *No person may sell, purchase, exchange, transport, receive, or offer to sell, purchase, or exchange any archeological resource if such resource was excavated or removed from public lands or Indian lands in violation of unauthorized excavation, removal, damage,*

alteration, or defacement of archeological resources or in violation of any provision, rule, regulation, ordinance, or permit in effect under any other provision of Federal law.

The law was set into effect on October 31, 1979. Twenty years later, its necessity remains. ARPA does not apply to artifacts collected prior to date of its inception, nor does it apply to artifacts legally obtained from private property. The mixing of collections via commercialization, however, raises the likelihood for illegally obtained artifacts to become lost in the shuffle.

Commercialization of artifacts or archeological resources has been and continues to be a serious threat to the archeological record. Monies involved increase with time, as does the seriousness of the business. The buying and selling of artifacts as "simple" as projectile points have made collecting as well as artifacts accessible to everyone. This commercialization is important because it has the potential to destroy the very base of the archeological record. Further, as Richner has stated, "the homogenization of collections has bastardized any potential research value of such" (1999 personal communication).

On the Subject of Fakes

Raymond Vietzen noted, "The blame is not with the faker alone but greed and ignorance provide the market and enormous profits. Fakes today are so good it is frightening to see what modern man can do" (1980:37). Flintknapping has become a relatively common hobby, though the production of fraudulent artifacts has been going on for a long time (Smith 1963:123). Not all replicated artifacts are intended to be fraudulent; in fact legitimate lithic experiments have provided archaeologists with a considerable amount of information on the technology (Crabtree 1982; Callahan 1979). These experiments have also provided, as Romain points out, " a technical database for the illicit manufacture of fraudulent artifacts" (1980:42). Fakes are often very difficult to detect, for the amateur and professional alike. This presents a twofold problem to the archeological record. First, the demand for stone artifacts on the market is likely to result in an increase in manufacture of fakes and replicates. Second, more false sites are being created during the manufacture of fakes and replicates; even when care is taken.

As noted earlier, the market for stone artifacts is great. Original artifacts typically drive a higher price than do modern replicas. Whittaker and Stafford report that, "many knappers sell points to dealers, and many points pass through several hands on the way to collections. There are thus many opportunities for points to acquire false pedigrees, and be scuffed up, stained, patinated, or otherwise "antiqued" for a more authentic look" (1999:209). Therefore, while not all replicates are produced with intent to deceive, many still find their way to a false authentic status. Further, the authors note, "We used to believe that large numbers of fakes would so debase the market for antiquities that it would reduce the mining of sites for artifacts. We no longer believe this; the market for both seems bottomless" (ibid. 208).

Estimates from Whittaker and Stafford's research indicate that as many as 1.5 million points are being produced per year and the amount of related waste would total 375 tons (ibid.211). It is not only the waste that is creating a problem, but the impact is being shown at raw material source sites as well. Many current material sources were in fact prehistoric sources. When modern knappers remove material, or test on site, the source becomes contaminated.

The author was recently exposed to a contaminated site. Fortunately, residents of the property happened to mention that they

had a relative who liked to knap. Over a very short period of time (just several years) the flakes he had produced found their way subsurface. Upon recovering the flakes, the archaeologists at the site were able to determine their inauthenticity. Had the residents not mentioned this, or had it been just one year later, it is quite possible that the flakes (made of local material) would have been thought to be genuine; thus altering site interpretation.

The Internet

Kuhn states, "Many times, the transfer of ownership of an artifact is from one individual to another, through barter or sale, and can be accomplished through personal contact or by publication through advertising. Many advertising sources are currently being used, including the Internet" (1999:53). Perhaps one of the most alarming trends in artifact commercialization is the incorporation of the Internet. This feature is making the buying and selling of artifacts much more accessible to everyone. Further, there is virtually no policing of what is being exchanged through this form of advertisement (the exception is E-bay). Hundreds of internet sites exist where one can quickly and easily point to the artifact of choice and have it delivered to their door. Sellers must also be finding this mechanism of sale quite lucrative.

In an unsystematic approach, the author conducted research on the Internet to assess the state of buying and selling artifacts on the Internet. The majority of sites did not provide much, if any, information regarding the original context of the artifacts. Moreover, only one of the sites made mention of the illegality of buying or selling artifacts collected from Federal or Indian lands. The potential for Interstate trafficking appears great. To test this, again unsystematically, the author wrote to one of the site's proprietors in an attempt to gage just how unregulated the operation is. The questioned as posed and the response are as follows:

> Question:
>
> I have what may be a stupid question, but I am fairly new to this hobby. I've been surfing the net looking at Indian artifact sites and noticed that sometimes the location from where the arrowhead was found is listed and sometimes it is not. I have a small collection of arrowheads and have been toying with the idea of selling them. Unfortunately, I do not know where all of them came from originally. Will this have an effect on what prices they may draw?
>
> Reply:
>
> It depends on the piece. Provenance and history make things sell faster. Some pieces are so much in demand that it doesn't make a lot of difference. Also a lot of folks make up the history as they go on. I would never do that, if I don't know that is what I will say... (Ron)

This clearly indicates the level at which these sites are operating. This was this first and only site the author wrote to and the response indicates that artifacts are simply being exploited as commodities. It was only further indicated by phrases such as "buy now and receive ten percent off" and "Points, just in time for Christmas!"

Conclusion

According to Murphy et al., "commodification is the process through which objects of archeological value are transformed through market activities into commodities with monetary value and transferred from public ownership to private" (1995:39). The problems addressed in this paper attest to the fact that this is indeed a dilemma. The role of collectors, the influx of fraudulent artifacts, and the Internet as a trading network are current issues that archaeologists will have to confront. Given the situation, they need to take a proactive stance against the commercialization of artifacts.

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