





## Debate Article

# The dangers of conflating responsible and responsive artefact stewardship with illicit and illegal collecting

Suzie Thomas<sup>1,\*</sup>  & Bonnie L. Pitblado<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Finland

<sup>2</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Oklahoma, USA

\* Author for correspondence:  [suzie.e.thomas@helsinki.fi](mailto:suzie.e.thomas@helsinki.fi)

Archaeology and private artefact collecting have complex and inextricably linked histories. Archaeologists have long drawn attention to criminal activity among collectors, but to assume that all private owners of cultural material—and any archaeologists who interact with them—have ill-intent or engage in illegal behaviour can cause as much harm to the archaeological record as the criminal actions themselves.

Keywords: responsible stewardship, artefact collection, professional archaeology

## Introduction

Most of the world's significant museum collections are the result of the activities of private collectors. Early archaeological expeditions purchased artefacts for museum collections to complement material from their excavations (Stevenson *et al.* 2016), and nascent museums recruited and paid local community members to collect artefacts to build up institutional holdings (Bassett 1986; Snead 2001). Innumerable artefacts remain in private hands, to be occasionally displayed in museums; others are hidden away, where few will ever see them. Some may even be forgotten or dispersed as collectors pass away and descendants inherit collections in which they have little interest.

Research over the past 50 years has illuminated the darker elements of collecting, highlighting connections between the antiquities market and such illegal activities as money laundering (Ulph 2011) and the drug trade (Patel 2009), not to mention the loss of knowledge that results—particularly concerning provenance—from looting (Gerstenblith 2007). While we do not intend here to provide another overview of the global market in illicit antiquities, we contend that the pendulum has swung too far, in terms of how many think about collecting as a cultural practice. Some heritage practitioners and scholars seem to perceive *all* private artefact collecting and commerce as unsavoury, and all who engage in either or both as morally and ethically bankrupt (e.g. Ascherson 2000; Silberman 2003). Such arguments include the suggestion that archaeologists who engage with artefact hunters and collectors cause more

---

Received: 11 April 2019; Revised: 1 September 2019; Accepted: 25 September 2019

© Antiquity Publications Ltd, 2020. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

damage through this ‘better than nothing’ approach than if they did not collaborate at all (Lecroere 2016). Explanations from collectors about their reasons for collecting have been dismissed as “appealing to higher loyalties”, or as constituting “techniques of neutralization” in the face of presumed criminality (MacKenzie & Yates 2016: 340). As Rasmussen (2014) observes, some professionals characterise hobbyists, such as metal detectorists, as ‘ambivalent’ about heritage, and suggests that the latter abuse the trust of museums and other institutions to whom they report their finds.

Some scholars are equally disdainful of colleagues who collaborate with non-archaeologists who own items of material culture. Some critics claim that this can lead to complicity in the market itself (Sassaman 2014; Ganciu 2018), as previously unknown material gains market value through its intersection with academics. This same concern has led some archaeological journals, including *American Antiquity*, *Latin American Antiquity* and *Advances in Archaeological Practice* (Society for American Archaeology 2018) to prohibit first publication of unprovenanced material.

In this debate piece, we unpack some of the assumptions still common in archaeological research and engagement. We offer ways forward, to counteract the damage done by stereotyping all members of the collecting public and the archaeologists who work with them. In so doing, we reflect on our own and others’ professional experiences of appropriately and productively engaging with some private artefact collectors for the benefit of all involved: archaeologists, collectors and the heritage resources.

## **Responsible and responsive collecting: re-nuancing motivations**

To be clear, we do not condone either the illicit trade in antiquities or the collection of artefacts in violation of any law. Nor do we deny the cultural damage that both practices and so-called irresponsible artefact hunting in general cause. We do, however, argue that cultural damage *also* occurs when archaeologists simplistically assume that non-professional or avocational collectors and artefact searchers invariably practise their hobby illegally and unethically, and that they do so to make money, to launder money or to engage in other nefarious activities (Mallouf 2000: 60; Comer 2015). Rather, we advocate a more nuanced stance that acknowledges the complexities of the relationship between the physical remains of the past and society in general.

Studies in Europe and the USA have made significant headway in demonstrating that the motivations of artefact hunters and collectors are complex and diverse. Thomas (2009), for example, investigated relationships between archaeologists and metal detectorists in England and Wales: although she acknowledged possible barriers to the way in which respondents may have answered certain questions (Thomas 2012: 60), it nonetheless revealed a far greater diversity of interests among detectorists than archaeologists had traditionally ascribed to them. The most common motivation—also identified in other Europe-based studies (e.g. Winkley 2016; Dobat *et al.* 2019)—is the desire to have direct engagement with the past, rather than an experience that is mediated via experts and passive museum displays (Dobat *et al.* 2019). Other motivators include wellbeing derived from being outdoors, opportunities for socialising and an interest in the technological aspects of metal-detecting devices (Thomas 2012).

More recently, Immonen and Kinnunen (2016: 163) studied the emerging Finnish metal-detecting community, finding that metal detectorists are a “heritage community with their own opinions, internal discussions, and forms of cohesion”. Similarly, Winkley’s (2016) research into metal detectorists’ phenomenological experiences of the English landscape revealed strong attachments to home, an intimate understanding of local history and very specific perceptions of the environment. Searchers and collectors with an interest in the more recent past seem to find a personal connection with its material culture. Several collectors of militaria connected to the German Occupation of the Channel Islands during the Second World War, for example, have expressed a wish to have experienced the occupation themselves (Carr 2010: 70). Similarly, engaging with the wilderness and a sense of place is an important aspect of metal-detecting for Second World War remains in Finnish Lapland (Thomas *et al.* 2016).

Throughout the USA, there are long traditions of collecting both pre-Columbian and post-Contact artefacts (Shott 2008). There, collector motivations are frequently legitimate (collecting and owning artefacts from private land in the USA is legal) and non-economic in nature, despite some professionals’ personal convictions to the contrary (see Pitblado 2014a & b; Goebel 2015). Here too, research is beginning to reveal a more realistic variety of reasons that people collect artefacts. Hart and Chilton (2015), for example, have studied artefact collection in Massachusetts as a ‘social practice’, with myriad motivations and purposes going beyond any traditional definition of ‘looting’. Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2004) conducted ethnographic research of artefact collectors in the San Pedro Valley of Arizona, identifying complex collector motivations, including serving as life-long (even multi-generational) stewards for the material culture of people who previously occupied their land. Finally, Gathright (2010: 57) studied artefact collectors in north-east Texas, whom he determined “collected out of a symbolic connection to past events”.

Professional archaeologists have much to gain by understanding that only a subset of artefact collectors is out to make money, or collects for other reasons antithetical to archaeological values. When archaeologists explicitly or implicitly consider all collectors to be looters, they demean those who approach their hobby with the same mindset as the archaeologists themselves, that is, as ‘students’ of the past (*sensu* SAA founder W.C. McKern (1937)). Thus stereotyped, collectors are unlikely to enter into the collaborative relationships with archaeologists that can produce positive outcomes for the people and heritage resources involved (LaBelle 2003). Archaeologists should also remember that to some members of descendant communities in the USA, Europe and elsewhere, archaeologists are just as guilty of appropriating material as any private artefact collector or looter (Mallouf 2000).

#### *Case studies in responsible and responsive stewardship/collaboration*

We do not need to look far for examples of the benefits to archaeology that can accrue when archaeologists collaborate with ‘responsible and responsive stewards’—a term adopted recently by the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) to refer to private artefact collectors who follow cultural resource laws and practise appropriate collection and curation standards

(see Shott & Pitblado 2015; Pitblado *et al.* 2018). These are precisely the artefact collectors at the centre of this argument—those who should never be conflated with looters, and who can contribute to archaeological knowledge if recognised as legitimate sources of information (Christensen 2013) and treated with respect.

Pitblado (2014a), for instance, showed that avocational archaeologists—most of them private collectors—found 24 of the 30 archaeologically accepted Clovis sites in the Americas. They also assisted archaeologists in locating four other such sites. Without collaboration between collectors and professional archaeologists, both researchers and the public captivated by studies of the First Americans would know almost nothing about the oldest archaeologically documented culture in Pleistocene America, *c.* 13 000 years ago.

In the 1970s, archaeologist Steven LeBlanc photographed and documented the world-renowned pottery crafted by Mimbres agriculturalists, who lived in the U.S. Southwest *c.* 1100–1250 AD. Although many of the vessels recorded by LeBlanc were in private collections, his respectful and exhaustive approach, reaching out to the vessels' owners, led to the creation of the Mimbres Pottery Images Digital Database, a research tool still routinely used by archaeologists (Arizona State University 2013).

In Europe, perhaps the most compelling evidence for the opening of dialogue and creation of pathways for collaboration with avocational hobbyists comes in the form of digital platforms. Since the 1990s, these have emerged for collating data and metadata around archaeological material discovered by the public—primarily metal detectorists. While the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England and Wales is the oldest and best documented example of this, similar finds databases have been established in the Netherlands, Denmark, Flanders and soon Finland—all of which are countries and regions in which hobbyist metal-detecting is a legal pastime.

Concerns persist around the damage that metal-detecting causes to the archaeological record, despite the presence of schemes such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme (e.g. Gill 2010; Renfrew 2010). There is increasing evidence, however, that the inclusion of metal-detecting data in archaeological studies illuminates aspects of the past that would otherwise be neglected or omitted if only professionally obtained data were included. In Belgium, for example, a study of metal-detected finds identified a previously unknown type of artefact (the so-called 'griffin brooches'), which has increased our knowledge of late tenth- to early twelfth-century AD culture on the Belgian coastal plain (Deckers 2012).

These large-scale, long-term projects are not 'populist pandering' (Schlanger 2017: 214); rather, they retrieve data that would otherwise not be recorded, with significant implications for research (Lewis 2016: 131). As Moshenska has observed, archaeological attitudes towards metal detectorists and other avocational archaeologists may say more about our profession than it does about non-professional activities:

*It is a measure of this community's widespread elitism and class snobbery that the most feckless professor of prehistory with a string of unpublished excavations is likely to be afforded a thousand times more respect than the most diligent member of a metal detecting club.* (Moshenska 2010: 24)

## Reflections and paths forward in Europe and the USA

As highly trained scholars, archaeologists should know better than to perpetuate stereotypes, particularly those that create barriers between themselves and stakeholders who can contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the archaeological record. In Europe, the USA and elsewhere, however, many archaeologists do just this, regarding all non-archaeologists who own items of ancient material culture as looters, and those archaeologists who collaborate with them as co-conspirators. This attitude curtails opportunities to learn about the past and promotes ill will from responsible and responsive stakeholders.

There are, however, productive paths forward. In 2015, the SAA established a Task Force to define appropriate relationships between professional archaeologists and artefact collectors; to develop a draft position statement on the subject for broad dissemination; and to list concrete actions that Society members can take to nurture relationships between archaeologists and ‘responsible and responsive collectors’.

Extensive research and much discussion with the SAA Board of Directors led to the publication of a final position statement (Pitblado *et al.* 2018), which includes the following formal recommendations:

1. *Provide education for archaeologists and archaeology students regarding the importance of privately held collections as potential sources of information about sites, and the irreplaceable loss of this information when responsible and responsive stewards are ignored or treated disrespectfully.*
2. *Where possible, encourage responsible and responsive stewards to work with a professional or avocational archaeologist to record and document sites and collections, and to enter that information into the State Archaeologist’s or State Historic Preservation Office’s files.*
3. *To capture archaeological data that may otherwise be permanently lost, encourage the development of national databases of documented and analysed privately held and legally acquired collections, akin to those developed in England and Wales through their Portable Antiquities schemes.*
4. *Encourage responsible and responsive stewards to donate their documented collections to an appropriate museum or public curation facility. If donation is not feasible, teach responsible and responsive stewards best curation practices so that they can provide maximum protection for collections.*
5. *Encourage responsible and responsive stewards to join organisations and programs that provide training to increase their archaeological knowledge and skills, and make it easier for them to share their knowledge with archaeologists.* (Society for American Archaeology n.d.: 2)

In Europe, a new European Public Finds Recording Network is being created to coordinate the efforts of those who, while aware of the challenges associated with hobbyist metal-detecting and other non-professional interventions with the physical remains, nonetheless recognise its potential for contributing to knowledge production (Dobat *et al.* 2020).

As our examples have shown, the knowledge that can be gained from pro-active interactions with non-professionals extends beyond archaeology. Ethnographic approaches are increasing the potential to understand contemporary human interfaces with material cultural heritage and how people understand and value it, a valid research goal in its own right. When we work with and listen to others, it is better for everyone—and it is better for archaeology. Every engagement is an opportunity for education, and an opportunity to be educated. This is not the same as entering engagements equipped only with trust and naivety, and archaeologists should be aware of the whole spectrum of cultural heritage intervention—from the seriously criminal end to the more responsible scenarios described here. It is partly the responsibility of university curricula to equip future professionals with both a general knowledge of these issues and the ability to think critically and make informed decisions about how to proceed. It is also the personal responsibility of practitioners and scholars to work with the wealth of extant research and to move beyond stereotypes and easy polemic.

## Acknowledgements

Suzie Thomas would like to acknowledge University of Helsinki Faculty of Arts funding to visit the University of Oklahoma, allowing her to work on this article with Bonnie Pitblado. She also acknowledges with gratitude funding from the Academy of Finland (decision number 310854), as part of the research project ‘SuALT—The Finnish Archaeological Finds Recording Linked Open Database (Fi: Suomen arkeologisten löytöjen linkitetty tietokanta)’. Bonnie Pitblado gratefully acknowledges funding from the Arnold and Wanda Coldiron endowment, gifted in part to build bridges among communities who share a passion for the past.

## References

- Arizona State University. 2013. Significant ancient pottery collection goes online. Available at: <https://asunow.asu.edu/content/significant-ancient-pottery-collection-goes-online> (accessed 16 January 2020).
- ASCHERSON, N. 2000. ‘The good collector’: fabulous beast or endangered species? *Public Archaeology* 1: 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.1179/pua.2000.1.1.73>
- BASSETT, C.A. 1986. The culture thieves: are we helping them loot the past? *Science* 86: 21–29.
- CARR, G. 2010. Shining a light on dark tourism: German bunkers in the British Channel Islands. *Public Archaeology* 9(2): 64–84. <https://doi.org/10.1179/175355310X12780600917559>
- CHRISTENSEN, A.L. 2013. The co-production of archaeological knowledge: the essential relationship of amateurs and professionals in twentieth century American archaeology. *Complutum* 24(2): 63–72.
- COLWELL-CHANTAPHONH, C. 2004. Those obscure objects of desire: collecting cultures and the archaeological landscape in the San Pedro Valley of Arizona. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 33: 571–601. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604266989>
- COMER, D.C. 2015. Archaeology as global public good and local identity good, in P.F. Biehl, D.C. Comer, C. Prescott & H.A. Soderland (ed.) *Identity and heritage*: 11–26. Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09689-6\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09689-6_2)
- DECKERS, P. 2012. ‘Productive’ sites in the Polders? ‘Griffin brooches’ and other early medieval metalwork from the Belgian coastal plain. *Medieval and Modern Matters* 3: 21–43. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.MMM.5.102018>
- DOBAT, A.S., S.O. WOOD, B.S. JENSEN, S. SCHMIDT & A.S. DOBAT. 2019. ‘I now look forward to the future, by finding things from our past ...’ Exploring the potential of metal detector archaeology as a source of well-being and

- happiness. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1639069>
- DOBAT, A.S., P. DECKERS, S. HEEREN, M. LEWIS, S. THOMAS & A. WESSMAN. 2020. Towards a cooperative approach to hobby metal detecting: the European Public Finds Recording Network (EPFRN) vision statement. *European Journal of Archaeology*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ea.2020.1>
- GANCIU, I. 2018. Heritage for sale! The role of museums in promoting metal detecting and looting in Romania. *Heritage* 1: 437–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage1020029>
- GATHRIGHT, R. 2010. Gravel bars, walking sticks, scorchers, and archies: an ethnographic look at the sub-culture of Native American artifact collectors. Unpublished undergraduate dissertation, Texas A&M University.
- GERSTENBLITH, P. 2007. Controlling the international market in antiquities: reducing the harm, preserving the past. *Chicago Journal of International Law* 8: 169–95.
- GILL, D.W.J. 2010. The Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Treasure Act: protecting the archaeology of England and Wales? *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 20: 1–11.  
<https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.333>
- GOEBEL, T. 2015. Grave consequences: crossing the line with collectors. *The SAA Archaeological Record* 15(5): 29–32.
- HART, S.M. & E.S. CHILTON. 2015. Digging and destruction: artifact collecting as meaningful social practice. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21: 318–35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.934267>
- IMMONEN, V. & J. KINNUNEN. 2016. ‘Quidditching’ and the emergence of new heritage identities—amateur metal detecting in Finland. *Public Archaeology* 15: 163–85.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2017.1352188>
- LABELLE, J.M. 2003. Coffee cans and Folsom points: why we cannot continue to ignore the artifact collectors, in L.J. Zimmerman, K.D. Vitelli & J. Hollowell-Zimmer (ed.) *Ethical issues in archaeology*: 115–27. Walnut Creek (CA): AltaMira.
- LECROERE, T. 2016. ‘There is none so blind as those who won’t see’: metal detecting and archaeology in France. *Open Archaeology* 2(1): 182–93.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0014>
- LEWIS, M. 2016. A detectorist’s utopia? Archaeology and metal-detecting in England and Wales. *Open Archaeology* 2: 127–39.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2016-0009>
- MACKENZIE, S. & D. YATES. 2016. Collectors on illicit collecting: higher loyalties and other techniques of neutralization in the unlawful collecting of rare and precious orchids and antiquities. *Theoretical Criminology* 20: 340–57.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480615607625>
- MALLOUF, R.J. 2000. An unraveling rope: the looting of America’s past, in D.A. Mihesuah (ed.) *Repatriation reader: who owns American Indian remains*: 59–73. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- McKERN, W.C. 1937. The amateur in archaeology. *Bulletin of the Texas Archaeological and Paleontological Society* 9: 108–11.
- MOSHENSKA, G. 2010. Portable antiquities, pragmatism and the ‘precious things’. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 20: 24–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.336>
- PATEL, S.S. 2009. Drugs, guns and dirt. *Archaeology* 62(2): 45–47.
- PITBLADO, B.L. 2014a. An argument for ethical, proactive, archaeologist-artifact collector collaboration. *American Antiquity* 79: 385–400.  
<https://doi.org/10.7183/0002-7316.79.3.385>
- 2014b. How archaeologists and artifact collectors can—and should—collaborate to comply with legal and ethical antiquities codes. *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 2: 338–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.7183/2326-3768.2.4.338>
- PITBLADO, B.L. *et al.* 2018. Process and outcomes of the SAA ‘Professional Archaeologists, Avocational Archaeologists, and Responsible Artifact Collectors Relationships Task Force’ (2015–2018). *The SAA Archaeological Record* 18(5): 14–17.
- RASMUSSEN, J.M. 2014. Securing cultural heritage objects and fencing stolen goods? A case study on museums and metal detecting in Norway. *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 47: 83–107.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00293652.2014.899616>
- RENFREW, C. 2010. Comment on the paper by David Gill. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 20: 28–29. <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.337>

- SASSAMAN, K.E. 2014. Editor's corner. *American Antiquity* 79: 381–84.  
<https://doi.org/10.7183/0002-7316.79.3.381>
- SCHLANGER, N. 2017. Brexit in betwixt. Some European conjectures on its predictability and implications. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 8: 212–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2017.1358324>
- SHOTT, M.J. 2008. equal o nll roofht w ded l e vsbr cted: a proposal for conservation of private collections in American archaeology. *The SAA Archaeological Record* 8(2): 30–35.
- SHOTT, M.J. & B.L. PITBLADO. 2015. Introduction to the theme 'pros and cons of consulting collectors'. *The SAA Archaeological Record* 15(5): 11–13.
- SILBERMAN, N.A. 2003. Second class relics: forgery, fantasy, and the ideology of antiquities collecting in the Holy Land. Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/neil\\_silberman/36/download/](https://works.bepress.com/neil_silberman/36/download/) (accessed 16 January 2020).
- SNEAD, J.E. 2001. *Ruins and rivals: the making of Southwest archaeology*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Society for American Archaeology. 2018. Editorial policy, information for authors, and style guide for *American Antiquity*, *Latin American Antiquity* and *Advances in Archaeology Practice*. Available at: [https://documents.saa.org/container/docs/default-source/doc-publications/style-guide/saa-style-guide\\_updated-july-2018c5062f7e55154959ab57564384bda7de.pdf?sfvrsn=8247640e\\_6](https://documents.saa.org/container/docs/default-source/doc-publications/style-guide/saa-style-guide_updated-july-2018c5062f7e55154959ab57564384bda7de.pdf?sfvrsn=8247640e_6) (accessed 16 January 2020).
- n.d. Society for American Archaeology statement on collaboration with responsible and responsive stewards of the past (2018). Available at: <https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/news-article/2018/08/01/statement-on-collaboration-with-responsible-and-responsive-stewards-of-the-past> (accessed 16 January 2020).
- STEVENSON, A., E. LIBONATI & A. WILLIAMS. 2016. 'A selection of minor antiquities': a multi-sited view on collections from excavations in Egypt. *World Archaeology* 48: 282–95.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2016.1165627>
- THOMAS, S. 2009. The relationships between archaeologists and metal-detector users in England and Wales. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Newcastle University.
- 2012. Searching for answers: a survey of metal-detector users in the UK. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 18: 49–64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2011.590817>
- THOMAS, S., O. SEITSONEN & V.-P. HERVA. 2016. Nazi memorabilia, dark heritage and treasure hunting as 'alternative' tourism: understanding the fascination with the material remains of World War II in northern Finland. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 41: 331–43.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2016.1168769>
- ULPH, J. 2011. The impact of the criminal law and money laundering measures upon the illicit trade in art and antiquities. *Art Antiquity & Law* 16: 39–52.
- WINKLEY, F. 2016. The phenomenology of metal detecting: insights from a unique type of landscape experience. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 25(2): Art.13.  
<https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.496>