

A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: Revised Editorial Policy on the Publication of Unprovenanced Antiquities

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On 4 January 2020, the Council of the Archaeological Institute of America adopted a new version of its policy on the publication of unprovenanced antiquities, specifically, objects acquired by a private or public collection after 30 December 1973 for which there is no earlier documentation or evidence for legal exportation from the country of origin. The revised policy applies to all content of the *AJA*.¹

The purpose of the AIA's policy, since the Council first endorsed the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property in December 1970, has been to condemn the looting of archaeological material and the illicit trade in antiquities. In accordance with resolutions of the AIA Council, it has been the policy of the *AJA* not to provide "the announcement or initial scholarly presentation of any object in a private or public collection acquired after December 30, 1973, unless its existence is documented before that date, or it was legally exported from the country of origin."² The intent of this policy is to deny such unprovenanced objects the appearance of legitimacy that publication in the *AJA* would confer.

The AIA's revised policy expands on the previous policy primarily in two regards. First, it defines what type of publication qualifies as the initial scholarly presentation of an unprovenanced object. In brief, such a publication or announcement must be in a peer-reviewed scholarly book, journal, or catalogue, in print or online, or in the permanent and accessible record of a peer-reviewed presentation to a learned society. Further, the initial scholarly presentation or announcement must include: "(1) an illustration (e.g., a photograph, a drawing, or similar graphic), (2) commentary specific to the object (such as dimensions and a description, including, as applicable, details of ware, decoration, production technology, etc.)," and, for epigraphic material, "(3) a transcription and (4) if appropriate, a translation."³

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¹ For the complete statement of the AIA's new policy, see: www.archaeological.org/governance/policies: "AIA Policy on the Presentation and Publication of Undocumented Antiquities."

² See N.J. Norman, "Editorial Policy on the Publication of Recently Acquired Antiquities," *AJA* 109.2 (2005) 135–36. Earlier versions of the *AJA*'s policy are: B.S. Ridgway and T.S. Wheeler, "Editorial Statement," *AJA* 82.1 (1978) 1–2; F.S. Kleiner, "On the Publication of Recent Acquisition of Antiquities," *AJA* 94.4 (1990) 525–27.

³ *Supra* n. 1.

Second, the new policy requires that publications of the AIA routinely call attention to the unprovenanced status of objects acquired by a private or public collection after 30 December 1973 without prior documentation or evidence of legal export from the country of origin.

If an undocumented object has received appropriate initial presentation, then it may be discussed or cited in the *AJA*, but it must be explicitly marked as unprovenanced. From now on, the identification of such an object must invariably include the designation “[unprov.]”⁴ In addition, the first mention of an undocumented object in an *AJA* article, report, or note must be accompanied by the citation of its initial scholarly publication or announcement, and the reference must include the following statement: “This object was acquired after 30 December 1973; there is no evidence of its documentation before that date or its legal export from the country of origin.”⁵ If the object also appears in the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) Registry of New Acquisitions of Archaeological Material and Works of Ancient Art (<https://aamd.org/object-registry/new-acquisitions-of-archaeological-material-and-works-of-ancient-art/browse>), the reference should include a link to the relevant entry.

The *AJA* will comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the new AIA policy. It could be argued that a brief mention of an unprovenanced object in the *AJA* is not equivalent to providing its initial scholarly presentation and so would be permitted by the AIA’s policy, and there has previously been some ambiguity around instances of this kind. However, even the brief mention of an undocumented object in the *AJA* confers some appearance of legitimacy, and the *AJA* will henceforth apply the strictures of the new policy to any mention or citation of undocumented objects. Thus, to be very clear: an object in a private or public collection acquired after 30 December 1973, the existence of which cannot be documented before that date, or for which there is no evidence of legal export

from the country of origin, or that has not previously received appropriate initial scholarly publication or announcement, may not be mentioned, cited, discussed, or illustrated in the *AJA*.

In the interests of transparency, the *AJA* will also ask that authors include the year in which an object was acquired (that is, permanently accessioned) when citing any object held in any private or public collection. For objects acquired before 30 December 1973 and for documented objects acquired after that date, the identification of the object should include the acquisition date (e.g., City, Museum of Ancient Art GR-632, acq. 1883). For undocumented objects acquired after 30 December 1973, the identification should include the acquisition date followed by the designation “[unprov.]” (e.g., City, Museum of Ancient Art GR-632, acq. 2003 [unprov.]).⁶ The flowchart included here illustrates if and how an object in a private or public collection may appear in the *AJA*.⁷

Aspects of *AJA*’s previous policy remain in effect. The *AJA* may publish the initial scholarly presentation of an unprovenanced object if the Editor-in-Chief believes that “the aim of publication is to emphasize the loss of archaeological context or acquisition history.”⁸ Reviewers of publications, catalogues, and exhibitions should state whether objects included in the publication or exhibition were acquired after 30 December 1973 without prior documentation or evidence of legal export from the country of origin and should follow the provisions for articles, reports, and notes when specific objects are mentioned. For exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, the new policy requires that the reviewer provide “a link to the acquisitions policy of the museum or exhibition venue.”⁹

⁴ C.A. Rollston (“Non-Provenanced Epigraphs II: The Status of Non-Provenanced Epigraphs Within the Broader Corpus of Northwest Semitic,” *Maarav* 11 [2004] 57–79) proposed a similar system for flagging unprovenanced epigraphs (73).

⁵ *Supra* n. 1.

⁶ To avoid any uncertainty, the acquisition date should be specified separately even when a museum accession number includes the year in which an object was acquired (e.g., City, Museum of Ancient Art GR-2003-632, acq. 2003 [unprov.]).

⁷ The flowchart was constructed by Josephine Shaya (*AJA* Museum Review Editor).

⁸ Norman 2005 (*supra* n. 2).

⁹ *Supra* n. 1. The previous policy required only that reviews “should state that the exhibition or publication in question includes material without known archaeological findspot” (*supra* n. 2: Norman 2005, 135).

Some element of subjectivity will at times be involved in implementing the new policy. In verifying that an object has received appropriate initial presentation, for example, there might be uncertainty about whether the vetting of a particular publication was commensurate with peer review or whether the commentary about an object is sufficiently detailed. Judgment calls of this sort are an aspect of the decision about whether or not to publish an article, report, or note. As with other aspects of that decision, the Editor-in-Chief, with the advice of the *AJA*'s Advisory Board and peer reviewers, will determine whether an object is or is not documented and has or has not received an appropriate initial scholarly presentation or announcement. I join previous Editors-in-Chief of the *AJA* since

at least 1978 in fully endorsing all efforts taken by the Archaeological Institute of America to prevent the destruction of archaeological sites and to impede illegal traffic in ancient objects.

Scholars who publish in the *AJA* will presumably share this concern for the preservation of archaeological context and the integrity of archaeological materials, and the implementation of the new policy will need the cooperation of *AJA* authors. As before, we will ask authors to sign a warranty confirming their compliance. A full explanation of the *AJA*'s new policy is available on *AJA* Online (www.ajaonline.org/submissions/editorial-policy). Implementation will begin with the July 2020 issue.

Jane B. Carter
Editor-in-Chief

Policy for the citation, mention, discussion, or illustration of an object in a private or public collection in an AJA publication, effective 1 April 2020:

