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Damien Hirst's Tale of Shipwreck and Salvaged Treasure

Elizabeth S. Greene and Justin Leidwanger

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TREASURES FROM THE WRECK OF THE UNBELIEVABLE, PALAZZO GRASSI AND PUNTA DELLA DOGANA, VENICE, 9 APRIL–3 DECEMBER 2017, by Damien Hirst, curated by Elena Geuna.

TREASURES FROM THE WRECK OF THE UNBELIEVABLE, by Damien Hirst, with a foreword by François Pinault, an introduction by Martin Bethenod, and essays by Elena Geuna, Simon Schama, Henri Loyrette, and Frank Goddio. Pp. 322, numerous color figs. Other Criteria, London 2017. £75. ISBN 978-1-906967-80-2.

THE UNDERSEA SALVAGE OPERATION: TREASURES FROM THE WRECK OF THE UNBELIEVABLE, by Damien Hirst, with photography by Christoph Gerigk and Steve Russell. Pp. 240, color figs. 128. Other Criteria, London 2017. £250. ISBN 78-1-906967-81-9.

TREASURES FROM THE WRECK OF THE UNBELIEVABLE: ONE HUNDRED DRAWINGS, by Damien Hirst, with an introduction by Amie Corry. Pp. 212, color figs. 100. Other Criteria, London 2017. £150. ISBN 978-1-906967-82-6.

It may seem odd to read an academic review of the exhibition and catalogue from an imaginary ancient shipwreck, and perhaps stranger still to see discussion in the *AJA* of an artist best known for shocking viewers with formaldehyde-preserved sharks and diamond-studded skulls. But with coral-encrusted objects alongside photographs and video footage of their staged recovery, Damien Hirst's new show, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* (Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, Venice), revels in archaeology as a gateway to the past. Purportedly lost in a Roman shipwreck nearly 2,000 years ago, the exhibition's cargo of "treasures," crafted by Hirst from marble, bronze, and precious materials, were submerged and raised from the Indian Ocean seabed by a team of salvors hired by the artist. Hirst, in the

guise of scientific patron, has "restored," catalogued, and interpreted the finds for public presentation in Venice.¹

Art has long found a muse in history, and grounding a fantastical narrative in a vaguely historical setting is hardly new. But in harnessing the scientific practice of archaeology to establish the link, Hirst's artistic project confronts the archaeological community with several fundamental questions. How does such work reflect the production and consumption of archaeology and cultural heritage for the world of art viewers and collectors? Beyond this privileged setting, what does this self-conscious representation of the archaeological process—even with an avowedly fanciful take and artistic license—reveal about individual and collective relationships with the material remains of the past? What role does the shipwreck context play in framing popular understanding of underwater cultural heritage? For consumers of contemporary art, the shock value of Hirst's exhibition comes from its depiction of archaeology in Hollywood-style extravagance—Indiana Jones meets a Roman *Titanic*; for scholars of antiquity, the show raises important concerns about the need to tell compelling stories of the past that move beyond the lure of the deep, the thrill of discovery, and the commodification of objects.

A decade in the making, Hirst's project opened in early April at the Venice Biennale and runs into December. The artistic fantasy is constructed around a collection of objects ostensibly recovered from the wrecked vessel *Apistos*, translated as "unbelievable," "incredible," or, perhaps more apropos, "suspicious" or "not to be trusted." From the outset, the interplay of truth and fiction creates a mythohistorical past on which Hirst juxtaposes ancient and modern. This narrative is woven together in an exhibition volume that serves at once as explanation,

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, it is noted that one of the reviewers served as a historical consultant to the artist.

catalogue, and record of finds. The creative introductory essays would be at home in a legitimate scientific volume but for their fictional premise. Authors who take part in creating the ruse include Elena Geuna, the exhibition curator; Henri Loyrette, former director of the Louvre; Simon Schama, historian and art critic; and Franck Goddio, director of the French excavations in the submerged harbor of Alexandria. Geuna opens the fairy tale in her essay, “The Coral Diver”: “Once upon a time there was a very wealthy collector, Cif Amotan II, a freedman from Antioch who lived between the mid-first and early-second centuries CE.”² The anagram (“I am fiction”) dispels any doubt about Amotan and the *Unbelievable’s* ill-fated journey, yet the various contributions to the volume offer snippets of a colorful life story that walks a fine line of plausibility. We are told that after amassing a fabulous fortune, Amotan rejected the traditional elite Roman lifestyle, escaping into the world of his own creative illusion through exploration and collection from all corners of the earth: not only sculpture and jewel-studded crafts but natural wonders, ethnographic materials, and a range of marvelous oddities befitting the most eclectic of elite Roman tastes. Loaded onto a massive purpose-built vessel and bound for dedication at Amotan’s new temple to the Sun, the collection was lost near Zanzibar, off the coast of east Africa, the edge of the world in the Roman mind.

The ship and its loss and recovery not only serve to establish the project narrative and link past with present but also play an equally important role as spectacles themselves. In “On the Name Of,” an essay about the lost vessel, Loyrette invents an ancient source for the *Apistos* in the *Deipnosophistae*, a third-century work by Athenaeus; the testimony of a fictional Lucius Longinus praises the ship’s size, capacity, and comfort.³ The catalogue informs us that this sailor Longinus is also attested on a papyrus from the Red Sea port of Myos Hormos.⁴ One historically attested Lucius Longinus, nomen Cassius (Suet., *Calig.* 24), was cuckolded by Caligula, whose outrageous pleasure crafts, the Nemi ships, were a fantasy brought to life

through the eccentric emperor’s excess.⁵ Supersized boats remained a source of great spectacle, and Caligula’s other famous transport, the barge built to carry from Egypt his 300-ton obelisk (now in Piazza San Pietro in the Vatican), became such a tourist attraction while moored in Puteoli that it was sunk and buried in the foundations for the new monumental lighthouse at Portus following Caligula’s fall. Loyrette’s Longinus may be fictional, but his ship and Amotan’s also recall one built by the statesman Verres, who was condemned in no uncertain terms by Cicero for his opportunistic plundering of Sicily’s heritage. Given the wonder associated with Amotan’s boat—the largest ever seen, according to Geuna⁶—it is astounding that finds of the ship itself never feature in the exhibition; the only physical object related to the ship is, ironically, a small-scale replica (fig. 1).⁷

From Geuna we learn that the ship’s fantastic cargo, lost for nearly two millennia, was discovered in 2008 off the coast of east Africa. New pieces of the puzzle are offered by Schama (in the essay “Inventory”), who describes discovering a papyrus inventory of the cargo during research for a book about bezoars in an antiquarian shop that would be at home on Knockturn Alley. Faulty memory of a record hand copied from a papyrus in a Cappadocian monastery nonetheless allows him to make the connection between a gold monkey caught in a fisherman’s trawl⁸ and the lost encyclopedic collection of Amotan. As recounted by Loyrette, a “lengthy review of the underwater discoveries” was prepared by fictional archaeologist Daniel Beder.⁹ Raised from the depths of the sea, the “treasures” were then restored, replicated in their original states, or left in the condition in which they were found. This trifecta of object types—highlighting preservation, replication, and decay—again foregrounds the role of the archaeological process in viewers’ enchantment with the deep.

⁵ Carlson 2002; McManamon 2016.

⁶ Hirst 2017, 10.

⁷ According to the exhibition catalogue (Hirst 2017, 329), the scale model was created using the results of research by the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Southampton. Such a model would not be out of place at the scholarly exhibition of any ancient wreck.

⁸ Hirst 2017, 113.

⁹ Hirst 2017, 13.

² Hirst 2017, 10. All Hirst 2017 citations in this review are to the exhibition catalogue (the first title listed above).

³ Hirst 2017, 13–17.

⁴ Hirst 2017, 329.



FIG. 1. Damien Hirst, *Scale Model of the "Unbelievable" with Suggested Cargo Locations*, surrounded by a selection of 44 drawings (Prudence Cumming Associates; © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS/ARS 2017).

The overwhelming cargo fills 5,000 m² in two historic venues run by the collector François Pinault in Venice, a city where collections of displaced treasure have long found a new home. Although the Punta della Dogana (old customs house) is perhaps the thematically obvious point of entry for a journey and the first in the catalogue, Palazzo Grassi offers a better initial glimpse into the archaeological backstory. Here, the visitor's plunge into spectacle meets an 18 m resin statue, *Demon with a Bowl*,¹⁰ painted to look like bronze with attached shells and coral growths. The colossal headless nude fills the atrium of the palazzo. Before viewing the label, one wonders whether the figure represents Poseidon or Zeus (it

resembles the Riace bronzes to some degree), perhaps Helios from the Colossus of Rhodes (a fitting dedication to the fictional temple to the Sun at Asit Mayor), or even a magnified and rejuvenated Herakles Epitrapezios. The catalogue's description of the figure as a transgressive hybrid demon whose bowl held human blood may make more sense to William Blake than to a scholar of antiquity; it serves as a reminder of one's journey to an unbelievable and treacherous place, one where space and time, like scale, are compressed and manipulated.

It would be impossible to do justice to the full collection in just a few pages. An upper floor of the Palazzo Grassi presents a spectacular nude maiden chained to a cliff (*Andromeda and the Sea Monster*). This figure evokes Andromeda from Boscotrecase but for the looming Jaws who joins the serpentine sea creature in attack. Gilded

¹⁰ Hirst 2017, 155, 320.

stone sculptures such as *Aten*, *Hathor*, and *Unknown Pharaoh* attest to the pull of Egyptomania on the ancient and modern collector. Others may discuss the purposefully anachronistic intrusions in the form of *Goofy*, a Transformer (*Huehuateotl and Olmec Dragon*), a cartoonish Mowgli and Baloo from the *Jungle Book* (*Best Friends*), or the equally inexplicable Aztec *Calendar Stone*. Worthy of special mention for a classical audience are the various “Grecian nudes” in the Punta della Dogana. One series offers a set of five smaller posed torsos in pink marble. A second, larger series renders a slender and rigid Knidian Aphrodite in bronze and pink marble as an “original” with its coral alongside ancient and modern copies (fig. 2). Stripped of their limbs and rendered incapable of modesty, the specimens are carefully arranged for the viewer. Their materiality and preservation recall the archaeological life cycle and artifact histories. No explanation is given for the missing arms, which were evidently already lost in antiquity. For another sculptural group, the catalogue notes that a “contemporaneous marble copy” (*Pair of Slaves Bound for Execution*) of a bronze found on the wreck (*Children of a Dead King*) was later used for target practice, with marks from soldiers’ bullets emulating physical wounds of the sort fabled for the Sphinx’s nose and the heads of the Serpent Column. Sepia-toned lightbox photographs of these imagined contexts offer a touch of staged historicity (*Five Antique Torsos in Surrealist Exhibition, Marble Slaves Used for Target Practice*).¹¹

Such tantalizing bits hint at fuller object biographies that occasionally allow many pasts to intersect for a richer cultural story. Arrays of “money” underscore a clear obsession of collector and artist across time but likewise offer a dazzling pseudo-ethnography: ingots ranging from Uluburun-style oxhides to inscribed shapes that resemble Hershey’s Nuggets to chunks of “native gold” that the catalogue ties to the mythical Golden Fleece, and dozens of glimmering coins of diverse origins

¹¹ Hirst 2017: *Andromeda and the Sea Monster* (184–85); *Aten* (81); *Hathor* (207); *Unknown Pharaoh* (209); *Goofy* (186); *Huehuateotl and Olmec Dragon* (174); *Best Friends* (187); *Calendar Stone* (34–5); Grecian nudes (47–9, 42–4, respectively); *Pair of Slaves Bound for Execution* (131, 319); *Children of a Dead King* (129); *Five Antique Torsos in Surrealist Exhibition* (46); *Marble Slaves Used for Target Practice* (130).

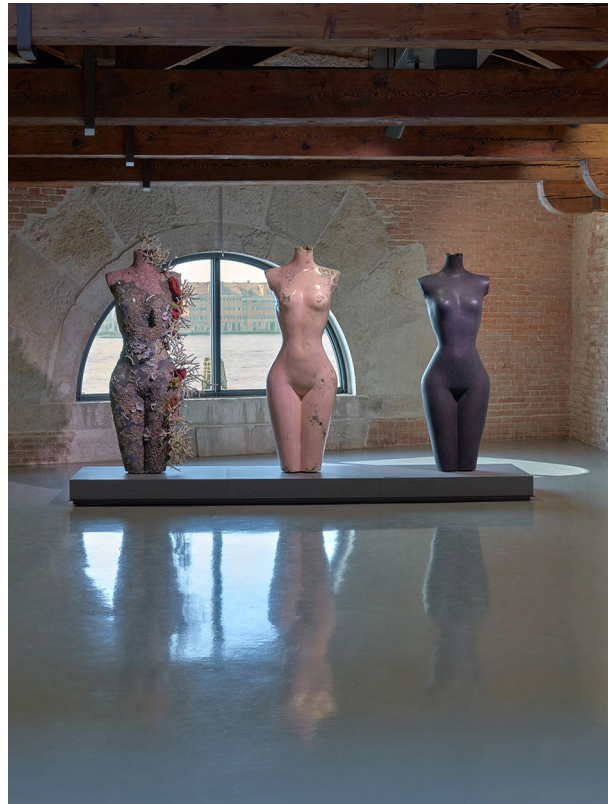


FIG. 2. Damien Hirst, three versions of *Grecian Nude* (Prudence Cumming Associates; © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS/ARS 2017).

and dates.¹² The shifting forms of value at stake in the exhibition favor viewing these alongside sets of cowrie shells from another vitrine. The label for *Skull of a Cyclops* in marble and painted bronze versions explains it as belonging to a mammoth, of the sort that fed the imagination of Augustus and other ancient collectors (fig. 3).¹³ The mammoth skull, along with a giant clamshell, nautilus (both in various forms of painted bronze), gleaming minerals, and other valuables, reflects the collector’s bent toward a cabinet of curiosities. Closer to home for an ancient shipwreck are a variety of humbler yet hardly quotidian jugs, bowls, and other vessels (fig. 4), including

¹² Hirst 2017, 329.

¹³ *Skull of a Cyclops* (Hirst 2017, 86–9, 179, 324); see also Mayor 2000, 142–44.

a single delightfully quirky and duly encrusted mutant (classical Chian and late Rhodian) amphora. The mystifying range of dates and origins are as archaeologically incongruous as occasional sightings of Mickey Mouse, who appears both alone (*Mickey*) and with the collector (*The Collector with Friend*).¹⁴ Nonetheless, they conjure up a shipboard assemblage and maritime social life while still maintaining the productive blurring of fact and fiction.

On a generic level, the underwater context pervades the collection through the interplay of marine concretion, disintegration, and remarkable preservation, but it is archaeology—or at least salvage—that makes the story possible. Two rooms in the Palazzo Grassi offer a montage of slides and video depicting the recovery of objects; both rooms were packed with viewers watching with rapture as each new object was revealed in its watery grave (fig. 5). Some of the photographs are replicated in lightboxes throughout the venues, offering an archaeological grounding for the staged objects. Divers clad in red suits emblazoned with the word “salvage” and full face masks paw through the sand in search of treasure, waving metal detectors across the stark seabed. A tank-supplied metal airlift vacuums debris from the mammoth skull. Occasional yellow tape measures stretch across the sand, while a diver records nothing on his slate. Wearing work boots with their wet-suits, divers walk statues across the seabed, massive lift balloons strapped to their brazen limbs. One diver caresses the waist and breast of a nude torso; another stares into a golden face. Still another struggles out of the water, weighted down by five bronze swords. Others ride to the surface on the back of a bronze lion. Barge workers raise a statue head triumphantly into the air like a trophy skull.

The colors, lighting, coral, and fish match the objects in their beauty and color, and viewers marvel at photographs of divers on the seabed kneeling as if in prayer before Buddhas and sphinxes surrounded by coral. In one sector of the site, the seabed is strewn with gold: a jumble of coins, jewelry, a massive temple door, and a sculpture of the severed head of Medusa waiting to turn viewers into gold rather than stone.¹⁵ Most often,



FIG. 3. Damien Hirst, *Skull of a Cyclops* (Prudence Cuming Associates; © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS/ARS 2017).

individual objects are scattered in discrete picturesque settings, resulting in a decontextualized field of (generally upright) treasures for the picking rather than the discernible jumble of a lost wreck. Ceramics are lifted from the depths in mundane plastic crates, while other objects beckon from murky buckets of water, shedding their salinity at a rapid pace before being laid out to dry in a tangle of cloth. Two young women sit on the barge, wrapping objects for protection; elsewhere a set of unidentifiable metal objects bake in the sun, arranged in rows on the slats of a wooden pallet. A series of artifact labels identify site numbers corresponding to no obvious plan.

For an additional £250, one can purchase *The Undersea Salvage Operation*, a limited-edition volume of spectacular photographs by Christoph Gerigk and Steve Russell detailing the salvage operation beneath and

¹⁴ *Mickey* (Hirst 2017, 188–89); *The Collector with Friend* (Hirst 2017, 64–5).

¹⁵ *Severed Head of Medusa*, in gold, crystal, and malachite (Hirst 2017, 106–7, 118–19, 198–99).



FIG. 4. Damien Hirst, *A Collection of Vessels from the Wreck of the "Unbelievable"* (Prudence Cuming Associates; © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS/ARS 2017).

above the sea; a longtime collaborator of Franck Goddio, Gerigk is well known in the archaeological community for his striking photographs of colossal statues from Alexandria's submerged harbor. But with such a lavish exhibition of engaging finds, it is hardly surprising that the artist prefers not to risk exhausting an audience with the tedium of proper archaeology. Professional archaeology could productively take note of the excitement generated not only by the site and its golden splendor but also by Hirst's juxtaposition of mysterious places and objects into an engaging and accessible story. This approach offers an opportunity for the public to interact with the past, a past that itself intersects with many other pasts, both fantastic and real. Yet the contrast between these nods at idealized scientific practice and the portrayal and discourse on "salvage" is jarring. In another catalogue essay ("Discovering a Shipwreck"), Goddio, apparently responsible for the operation that relocated the *Apistos*, notes that scientific approaches do not preclude emotional ones despite the laborious research, geophysical detection, and complex excavation involved

in the exploration of an ancient wreck.¹⁶ He uses the expression "inventer une épave," to describe the process of transforming a figment of fancy into an unbelievable shipwreck. At its core, this fantasy reveals how Hirst and others imagine the glamour of archaeology, whether underwater or on dry land. The sop to scientific practice bears in no way on the beguiling backstory, the disposition of finds, or their interpretation, with the result that tape measures and artifact labels are as wanting of context as any of the statues littering the seabed. The underwater archaeological environment frames the aesthetics of encrusted ancient objects and their modern recovery, but it does little to inform their past or future.

As Hirst's modern character seeks to understand his kindred ancient spirit, Geuna's essay celebrates Amotan as "a singular collector, wanting almost to embrace and possess the whole world."¹⁷ Yet Cicero castigated Verres

¹⁶Hirst 2017, 24–5.

¹⁷Hirst 2017, 10–11.



FIG. 5. Damien Hirst, *Hydra and Kali Discovered by Four Divers* (C. Gerigk; © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS/ARS 2017).

for precisely such personal avarice. The unflattering but glaringly obvious comparison for Amotan is offered unapologetically by Loyrette: Petronius' Trimalchio, another wealthy freedman whose garish excesses make him a caricature of the nouveau riche. It is clearly impossible to separate Amotan and Hirst with their conspicuous consumption, fetishization, and conscious rejection of elite norms; *Bust of the Collector* looks remarkably like Hirst as a heroically nude but otherwise rather traditional republican statesman.¹⁸ The obsessive zeal they share is summed up nicely by Schama's description of Amotan: "Brought to light now, his bloated excesses, his feverish passion to acquire, his pornographic ecstasy in the writhing of serpents and the torment of mortals—all seem pretty much in tune with the tastes of our time, do they not?"¹⁹ Barely

updated images of ancient rape and enslavement give one pause about Hirst's newly gilded bodies. Manufactured historical sources provide tantalizing insights into Amotan, but we learn little about the ancient freedman beyond his astrological status as a probable Gemini, inferred by Loyrette's archaeologist Daniel Beder based on his interest in strange sculptural pairs, metamorphoses, trade, and faraway places;²⁰ of course, Hirst, too, is a Gemini.

Perhaps the most striking parallel between the two collectors lies in the asymmetrical power structures through which they gain access to their "treasures." Stepping back from the glittering surfaces and sparkling sea, one wonders how in his travels Amotan was able to acquire rare or unique objects from the far corners of the earth. Most are unlikely to have been sold on some ancient art market. Were they once looted from a temple

¹⁸ Hirst 2017, 195.

¹⁹ Hirst 2017, 23.

²⁰ Hirst 2017, 14.

as the proceeds of war or by a rapacious governor, sold to the highest bidder, or offered as gifts to curry favor with a generous benefactor? The commodification of cultural objects began early in their life cycle, and as Hirst assumes possession from a faraway place of the physical objects accumulated by his ancient doppelganger, he takes on the mantle of his predecessor in commodifying cultures. The exhibition has been publicly criticized for cultural or intellectual appropriation of ethnographic objects such as the Nigerian *Ife Head*.²¹ Intimately linked but still more brutal is the physical appropriation by ancient and modern collectors (Amotan and Hirst, respectively), whose exploitative acts alienate the heritage of those at the losing end of the power discrepancy.

The shipwreck context provides not only a dramatic setting for the treasures but one in which any cultural material out of sight is assumed to be up for grabs. In this underwater world, those with the resources, industriousness, and technology—not to mention refined artistic tastes—are allowed, or rather obliged, to salvage the riches of the past.²² The setting, off the coast of Zanzibar (Tanzania), is equal parts dramatic and tragic, recalling a long history of western colonialism that saw wholesale liquidation of cultural heritage of local populations at the hands of wealthy and powerful European colonizers. Recent years have seen the newest chapter in this exploitative narrative off the east coast of Africa focus specifically on the commercial recovery of shipwrecks by private interests.²³ In salvaging treasures from the waters of Tanzania—not currently a signatory to the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage²⁴—Hirst fits better into the model of unscrupulous treasure hunter than scientific benefactor or cultural patron. The *Unbelievable* catalogue offers striking parallels to the one

produced by the Smithsonian for the planned exhibition of the salvaged ninth-century Belitung shipwreck off Indonesia, which was cancelled because of its endorsement of commercial recovery and the sale of cultural heritage from a source nation.²⁵ The clamor against the Smithsonian exhibition can be viewed along with the protest of the animal-rights activists 100% Animalisti, who dumped 40 kg of dung on the steps of the Palazzo Grassi before the opening of Hirst's exhibition. In this case, the group raged against the artist's past use of animals and his defamation of Venice, a city of "REAL Art," with the commercialized fantasy of a millionaire parvenu.²⁶

Indeed, the very staging of the exhibition in Venice at the Punta della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi highlights the rejection of contemporary archaeological practice even as it exploits stereotypes about the discipline. The Punta della Dogana served as Venice's customs house, a fitting space for the arrival of these "lost" treasures in the west. Palazzo Grassi has hosted archaeological exhibitions, including shows about Phoenicians, Etruscans, and Celts. The creation of an elaborate museum context for the display—complete with curator, audio guide, catalogue, and museographic labels that describe not only the objects and materials but also historic details—contrasts with the reality of a collection produced for sale. While this fate is not celebrated in the exhibition or media coverage, the viewer's awareness tacitly subverts the traditional role of the museum as keeper and preserver of archaeological collections in the public interest. The prohibition against buying archaeological objects from historic museums here offers a tantalizing taboo that informs the marketing appeal for these "artifacts."

Hirst's collection of treasures thus has much in common with Venice's other archaeological past, as a destination for the objects looted by conquerors. Perhaps the most famous are the Cavalli di San Marco, the four

²¹ For Hirst's gilded interpretation, see *Golden Heads (Female)* (Hirst 2017, 115, 321). The critique by Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor is detailed in G. Bowley, "Damien Hirst Controversy at Venice Biennale," *New York Times*, 10 May 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/05/10/arts/design/damien-hirst-controversy-at-venice-biennale.html.

²² Greene et al. 2011.

²³ Maarleveld 2015.

²⁴ A current list of states party to the 2001 UNESCO Convention can be found at www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=13520&language=E&order=alpha.

²⁵ Krahl et al. 2010. See also Green (2011) for a critical review.

²⁶ L. Muñoz-Alonso, "Damien Hirst's Planned Venice Exhibition Targeted by Animal Rights Group . . . with Poop," 15 March 2017, *artnet News*, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-hirst-venice-exhibition-animal-rights-group-892277>; "Venezia—blitz vs Damien Hirst—40 Kg di sterco e striscione a Palazzo Grassi," 7 March 2017, *100% Animalisti*, <http://www.centopercentoanimalisti.mobi/venezia-blitz-vs-damien-hirsts-40-kg-di-sterco-e-striscione-a-palazzo-grassi/>.

horses that adorned the Basilica di San Marco. Most likely displayed first in Rome atop a triumphal arch, the horses were taken as spoil to Constantinople, then brought to Venice during the struggles of the Fourth Crusade. In 1797, Napoleon took the horses to Paris, where they stood atop the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel before their return to Venice after the Battle of Waterloo.²⁷ The horses recall an era of plunder that served nation-building interests, where the trophies of war were erected for public display. Evoking these days before legal protection of national heritage from plunder, Hirst brings a new pile of loot to Venice. If only the obelisk, described in the catalogue as 26 m tall and installed on the deck of the ship, had also “survived”—despite this mention it appears nowhere in the exhibition, perhaps having been lost at sea or in a later artistic decision—Hirst could have adorned the city with an imposing yet semiotically flexible Egyptian monument in the style of Augustus’ Rome or Theodosius’ Constantinople.²⁸

Contemporary art and scientific archaeology need not work with the same tools and constraints, or toward the same end. The use of archaeological practice in art, particularly on such a large stage, should give us pause to examine its success in communicating with the public. We take it as the job of the archaeologist not only to work with the material remains of the past to construct the most plausible and unbiased accounts we can but also to leverage the past to contribute toward improving the present human condition; we take it as the artist’s job, when engaging with our collective past, to reflect on this past and to challenge boundaries and perceptions but also to enrich humanity. Here, archaeology is used as a framework to exploit, collect, or sell off artistic works in the guise of, but with disregard for, diverse cultural heritage. Such a neocolonial paradigm plays into the imperialist and exploitative relationship in which archaeology once developed as a dilettante’s hobby rather than the inclusive science it has since become. Hirst might claim to be consciously co-opting the paradigm to challenge systems of knowledge production and appropriation, but nothing in the exhibition or associated volumes suggests as much.

In the end, the exhibition is an unsettling reminder of the gulf between scientific practice and popular conception of archaeology, but it likewise underscores the powerful hold of the past over the public imagination. From this perspective, even as it brings some publicity to the discipline, the archaeological framework also represents something of a lost opportunity for all parties, from the public to the academic community to Hirst, who could have aligned himself with the multicultural and inclusive trajectories of contemporary archaeology rather than the treasure hunters of a colonial past. The fantasy could have been easily nudged to imagine a collaborative local and international archaeological team working according to best practices. Original artifacts could have benefited the local community, while the Venice exhibition could have celebrated a loaned collection along with exploration through artistic replication and variation. Such a practical and material shift would have been subtle and unobtrusive but would have held substantive implications for how art can challenge and redress the colonial past in the present. Instead Hirst frames himself as Arthur Evans, approaching his site like Knossos and transforming it into a gaudy fantasy. In fact, the collection of “Renaissance” drawings of fabled objects from the wreck (see fig. 1), signed by the artist in an easily deciphered anagram (“In this dream”) and available for purchase in a third volume for £150 (*Treasures From The Wreck of the Unbelievable: One Hundred Drawings*), recall Piet de Jong and the Gilliérons’ reconstructions of Knossos frescoes in Art Nouveau and Art Deco style. While archaeologists are fond of critiquing Evans’ concrete structures, nonetheless Papadopoulos has aptly noted, “Whatever the accuracy of the restoration of the ‘Palace of Minos,’ the building today represents one of the finest examples of 1920s architecture anywhere in modern Greece.”²⁹ If the mythological and historical costume of Hirst’s “gigantic epic” is likewise truly “of our time,”³⁰ then archaeology must reconsider its role in public consumption of the past to stress how narratives and values are constructed.

Objects have not just personal, aesthetic, or commodity value but also cultural significance. In the incisive play among forms of value in Hirst’s exhibition—protocur-

²⁷ Toniato 1979.

²⁸ *Scale Model of “The Unbelievable” with Suggested Cargo Locations* (Hirst 2017, 10, 329); see also Parker 2014.

²⁹ Papadopoulos 2005, 101.

³⁰ As Loyrette describes it in his essay (Hirst 2017, 17).

rencies, raw and cast gold, statuary in competing material manifestations—cultural and ethnographic value remain largely unexplored. Incorporating the archaeological process in the artistic narrative does not necessitate showing tape measures or artifact labels. Rather, it could involve reflecting on how we can produce not just a more detailed or colorful past but one that is multifaceted and meaningful for all stakeholders. In marrying art to outdated views of archaeology, Hirst reifies an exploitative approach to heritage and an appropriation of others' past for a new elite. Artistic license demands artistic responsibility; casting the new collector in the stereotype of the old opens those same old colonial wounds that archaeology has been at pains to right. History, in this case, is unfortunately still being written by the victors two millennia later.

Notwithstanding these reservations, perhaps the most provocative facet of the artistic project can serve as encouragement and caution for the archaeological community: Hirst's compelling storytelling effectively competes with his stunning objects in the context of arguably the world's most important international art festival. So carefully constructed is the tale that even the keenest visitor cannot reliably distinguish truth from fiction. Archaeologists, too, are storytellers at heart, and although our narratives frame artifacts differently, the exhibition is a timely reminder of both the ongoing power and the broad public appeal of the stories objects can tell.

Elizabeth S. Greene
Department of Classics
Brock University
1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way
St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1
Canada
egreene@brocku.ca

Justin Leidwanger
Department of Classics
Building 110
450 Serra Mall, Main Quad
Stanford University
Stanford, California 94305
jleidwa@stanford.edu

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