Moquegua is a modest city of almost 40,000 people on the desert Pacific slope of the Andes. ... Nevertheless, right on the main square, nestled within the remaining walls of the collapsed 19th-century cathedral, stands a 9,700 square foot, three-story, modern archaeological museum. ... Admission costs about as much as a bottle of soda, and less or nothing for those unable to afford that. ... Any sensible person might wonder what such an oversized institution is doing in such a sleepy little town...
Exchanges — Interamerican Dialogue

Conflict of Interests?
Leonardo López Luján

In April 2000, two well-known institutions, in the United States and France, exhibited prehispanic archaeological pieces. In doing so, the institutions demonstrated two diametrically opposed policies toward the black market in stolen pieces. Dumbarton Oaks, the dynamic research center in Washington, D.C., promotes studies on the history of landscape architecture, Byzantine art, and Precolombian art. It is famous for its small but select collection of Mesoamerican objects collected by Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss over 50 years, beginning in 1912. In 1962, the Blisses donated their Precolombian collection to Dumbarton Oaks (which had been on loan to Harvard University since 1940). The Bliss legacy does not purchase looted antiquities; it funds serious academic meetings, a fellowship program, three specialized libraries, and various series of publications.

Recently, the board of Dumbarton Oaks decided to include a new archaeological piece in the gallery in honor of the former curator of the Precolombian collection, Jeffrey Quilter and his exceptional group of advisors were faced with the option of purchasing a work of art on the black market. Instead, they requested a piece on loan from the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. This decision respected the third ethical principle of SAA that condemns the commercialization of archaeological objects because it contributes to the destruction of sites and the contextual information fundamental to the understanding of the archaeological record. As a result, the museum acquired a portable sculpture from Melanesia, a polychrome figurine from Chupevaro, and a Maya vase from the Perú that were not enough, pieces that have been known for decades to be false were presented, including a moai kavakava from Easter Island and a mask representing the Aztec god Xipe Totec.

The Louvre's recent purchase seemingly legitimizes and promotes the clandestine art market. The effects are already visible: The value of uni sculptures has multiplied tenfold in the black market; the Parisian auction house Drouot has several nok pieces for sale that were illegally taken out of their country; and furtive antiquity hunters are devastating Equatorial African archaeological sites. Fortunately, the Louvre's purchases have been denounced in the French press as well as by ICOM, UNESCO, the Société des Americanistes, and the governments of Nigeria and Niger. Strangely enough, the Mexican government issued no comment regarding such harmful practices that negatively affect both our cultural patrimony and the scientific advances of our discipline. It also contributed to the magnum museographic operation by lending a greenstone Olmec figurine discovered at El Manatí, Veracruz.

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