

The archaeological pieces and their study from the point of view of the History of Art

Written by Francisco Valdez

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The recent debate on the value of the study of archaeological pieces that have lost their original context led us to a conversation with one of the greatest scholars of the history of the Andean Art, and certainly the most important pre-Columbian cultures of Ecuador: Tom Cummins, Dumbarton Oaks Professor of Pre-Columbian and Colonial Art History at Harvard University, Massachusetts. PhD. In History of Pre-Columbian Art since 1988, at UCLA.



Cummins was in Ecuador between 1987 and 1989 as part of an agreement between the Central Bank Museum of Guayaquil and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). During this period he worked with Olaf Holm and many of the foreign and national researchers, who visited Guayaquil and Quito during those years. He studied thousands of archeological pieces in Ecuadorian museums and made a brilliant synthesis of many artistic traditions of the pre-Columbian Ecuador. He has published several articles on the subject, along with Constaza Di Capua, are the only pre-Columbian art historians in the country. His vision of anthropological archaeology is broad and experienced, so their approach is recognized and respected worldwide.

This casual conversation occurred spontaneously. Our aim was to obtain their professional point of view on a controversial and sensitive issue. Herein we reproduce some concepts that can guide us in the debate on the subject.

Arqueología Ecuatoriana: What are we to do with objects that are so clearly made according to a heightened sense of how they should appear in the world? We believe to know what to do if they are made within our own cultural context, especially in the past three-hundred years. But what of the object that comes from a different cultural context and period? How does this object come into the present and a new cultural context? Should this matter at all in the study of the past? Is it merely “epiphenomenal”?

Tom Cummins: These questions can become contentious when such objects are claimed to be the proprietary right of only one intellectual sensibility, one interpretive model. Such contentions are groundless, I would argue, as there is no one discipline that is so intellectually capacious that it can fully address all issues. In fact, interdisciplinarity is increasingly important

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in all areas of intellectual inquiry. We certainly see this in the study of science today, and it is increasingly so in the social sciences and the humanities. Interdisciplinarity means the coming together of scholars from different disciplines to address related questions.

So, in light of the questions posed above, it is important to ask whether the disciplines of art history and archaeology are so antithetical in aim and method that they cannot contribute to each other and to our understanding and appreciation of the Pre-Columbian past. At an instant, the answer is no; that they are not antithetical. And yes; they do contribute to each other. After all, the two disciplines share the same intellectual origin. Many departments in the United States and Europe are called the department of art history and archaeology such as at Princeton and Columbia. The archaeological component of these departments is most often comprised by scholars working in East Asia, the Middle East and the Ancient and Classical traditions. Increasingly, scholars studying Africa and pre-Columbian America are also found in these departments. These scholars contribute to the interpretation of the past through the formal and iconographic studies and in the case of Maya studies through epigraphy.

However, unlike scholarship in the Classics where there is an ongoing relationship between those interested in the art historical study and those who concentrate on site excavations, there has arisen in some sectors of Pre-Columbian studies a marked animosity toward art history by archaeologists. In part, this animosity arises from the commoditization of the past in its various forms and the erroneous conclusion that art historians are the only ones implicated in it. Most pronounced is the looting of sites for objects that can be sold on the antiquities market. These are often the objects clearly made according to a heightened sense of how they should appear in the world. They come to form collections both private and public and are the objects that most often form the focus of art historical investigation. As such, these objects rarely have any known context and the acquisition of them often means the destruction of their original context. The desire for these objects is fueled by many avenues, not the least of which is archaeology itself.

A. E.: So, what is then to be done?

T.C.: As scholars, we could ignore the collections entirely. This would not make art historical or archaeological practice any less complicit in their formation. And the collections will continue to exist, even if collecting were to stop. So, I would first suggest that archaeology and art history begin by putting the false dichotomy pure and impure aside. By that I do not mean to ignore or offer an apologia for illegal excavations. But this fact should not stand in the way of collaboration in the interpretation of the past and its material expressions.

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