



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEALERS IN ANCIENT ART

Most Egyptian artefacts held abroad were exported legally, says former Antiquities Minister Mamdouh al-Damaty

Egyptologist professor argues that it is in his country's interests to leave them where they are

March 3, 2017: Egypt's former Antiquities Minister has said that retrieving Egyptian artefacts from abroad is not in Egypt's interests, news sources from within the country report.

Prof. Mamdouh al-Damaty, an Egyptologist who was Minister from 2014-16 and believes that displaying his country's heritage in other nations promotes Egypt across the world, also pointed out that the majority of Egyptian artefacts abroad were legally exported before laws were introduced to ban exports.

Vincent Geerling, chairman of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art (IADAA), has welcomed Damaty's speech, and is calling on the authorities in Egypt to take note.

Geerling has also suggested that re-introducing licensed sales of minor artefacts might be a way of helping-Egypt to finance the urgently needed protection of archaeological sites.

"At IADAA, we have been campaigning for years on the issue of what has and hasn't been legally exported, while watching with dismay as international bodies introduce inappropriate policy to deal with perceived wrongs that, for the most part, do not exist," said Geerling.

"So much of what Prof. Damaty is saying is exactly what we have been arguing for a long time now, but our views have been ignored or dismissed. Hopefully, now someone as distinguished and knowledgeable as Egypt's former Antiquities Minister has put forward the same arguments, we will all be listened to."

Those arguments acknowledge the fact that Egypt traded its artefacts legally over long periods, including in the 20th century, when the Cairo Museum had its own saleroom.

"In many other cases," one news report quoted Damaty, "artefacts were presented by Egypt's kings as gifts to foreign dignitaries, rulers and officials, before the development of the current laws to protect antiquities and ban this habit."

Foreign archaeological missions were also allowed to take a percentage of the artefacts they discovered in Egypt, making it impossible for Egypt to recover these artefacts now, because they were legally exported, he said.

In fact, Damaty went as far as stating that the majority of Egyptian artefacts abroad had been legally exported.

His speech came as Egypt's ongoing financial problems led to the suspension of 14 restoration projects and cutbacks in measures to protect archaeological sites, reports said.

Significantly, before the coup the Antiquities Ministry paid for all the projects itself and was a net contributor to government coffers, but now depends on central funding.

Until recently, Geerling said, "Egyptian embassies have challenged the sale of many artefacts, that had been in collections for decades and more, at fairs or auction, without providing any evidence at all to show that they were stolen.

"The current Egyptian authorities' view is that unless collectors, dealers and auction houses can demonstrate an unbroken provenance from when an object was excavated, it should be deemed illicit – guilty until proved innocent, if you like. That is legally flawed."

He argues that following the spirit of the former Antiquities Minister's speech, such a policy needs to be replaced by something more positive.

"Egypt had a legal trade in antiquities up until around 40 years ago. Why not revive a properly licensed, self-sustaining legal trade in minor objects that are of no great importance to Egypt's national heritage, so that the trade can help Egypt create a revenue stream to finance the necessary protection of archaeological sites, as it is obliged to do under Article 5 of the UNESCO 1970 convention," he said.

Source references:

The Egyptian Independent: <http://goo.gl/EbfgZi>

Egyptian Streets: <http://goo.gl/HV8gK4>

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