



Debate Article

‘Not with the same brush’

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Thomas and Pitblado (2020: 1060) recognise that the interactions between professional archaeologists (and presumably also museum personnel) and collectors is wrought with ethical questions and concerns.

The Society for American Archaeology, the professional organisation of which I am the current president, exhorts its members to refrain from “all activities that result in the loss of scientific knowledge and access to sites and artifacts, [such as] irresponsible excavation, collecting, hoarding, exchanging, buying, or selling archaeological materials” (SAA Bylaws, Article II: Objectives; <https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/about-saa/society-bylaws>). In addition, Principle 3 of the Society’s Principles of Archaeological Ethics—Commercialisation—asks archaeologists to “discourage, and should themselves avoid, activities that enhance the commercial value of archaeological objects, especially objects that are not curated in public institutions, or readily available for scientific study, public interpretation, and display” (<https://www.saa.org/career-practice/ethics-in-professional-archaeology>).

I agree with the authors that the stereotypical representation that *all* artefact collectors “practise their hobby illegally and unethically, and that they do so to make money, to launder money or to engage in other nefarious activities” (Thomas & Pitblado 2020: 1060) is overly broad and misrepresents a large group of people who are deeply aware of the scientific information contained within the material culture that they collect. Still, while money might not be the motivating factor behind some artefact collection, I continue to have concerns about the ongoing disturbance of archaeological sites, the loss of contextual information about artefacts, the misperception of the idea of ‘value’ and the indirect competition between archaeologists and collectors.

Thomas and Pitblado (2020) are correct in calling out those who use hyperbole to imply that all who collect are somehow tied to money laundering, the art-theft black market or the most heinous aspects of these activities. I agree that by exaggerating such issues we run the risk of painting collectors with a broad and over-encompassing brush.

As Thomas and Pitblado (2020) note, the SAA prohibits first publication of unprovenanced material as an attempt to prevent the ascription of academic (and therefore financial) ‘value’ to collections acquired under questionable circumstances. The authors cite as an example the work of LeBlanc on Mimbres pottery as a contribution to science, and I agree. I still, however, have concerns about using such unprovenanced material in archaeological and/or museological research. Without a known and recognised context, the materials have no ‘academic value’. There are too many forgers or artists who can produce authentic-looking materials that may confuse those who study such objects, and can therefore impact any validity that our discussion of the human past might have.

To ascribe these concerns about context to the majority of artefacts of the North American pre-Contact period is, of course, somewhat excessive. The value of most pre-Contact archaeological materials in the USA is scientific; and yet people still collect objects that arouse their curiosity, such as sherds of pottery, ‘arrowheads’ or other mundane artefacts. Other materials from archaeological sites have monetary value that is gained via the buying and selling of antiquities through auction houses (both physical and digital), eBay and other open and covert markets. These objects often have aesthetic value in that they are wonderful examples of technological and creative arts, such as ground stone objects, fantastic pottery vessels and carved and incised shell necklaces arousing awe and wonder. This aesthetic value (and the monetary value derived from that) can, in some situations, lead to further conflict between collectors and researchers concerning the appropriation of artefacts.

As archaeologists, we teach our students that it is archaeological context rather than the object itself that has value. If (and this is a very big ‘if’) we can effectively communicate that point more widely, we stand a good chance of being able to create strong working relationships with a wider array of people whom we can trust—not just collectors but the general public as well.

While I have less of a concern with individuals who primarily collect from the surface of archaeological sites, I take greater issue with collectors who utilise small shovels, trowels or other digging implements to explore subsurface deposits for ‘targets’. Small pits created by such digging activities pock-mark many archaeological sites in the USA, leaving the archaeologist to wonder “what’s missing from the archaeological record?” In this regard, those collectors who maintain good records can help to provide the information that is often lost, along with information that archaeologists might not even know was missing.

Thomas and Pitblado (2020) draw attention to the haughtiness with which many professional archaeologists look upon avocational archaeologists or collectors. As the authors note, to many Indigenous groups, archaeologists are only a little different than illegal excavators of materials. Indigenous groups in the USA often decry that the items being collected rarely relate to the culture of the person who is collecting them, whereas in many European countries, collectors can trace historical relationships (real or perceived) backward through time to create social and historical connections (Ulla Odgaard *pers. comm.*).

How can ethical archaeologists work through such concerns? Thomas and Pitblado (2020: 1060) are correct in ascribing importance to working with “responsible and responsive collectors”. Pitblado’s (2014) example about collaboration between collectors and professional archaeologists leading to the discovery of many Clovis sites is relevant in that it underlines not only the importance of working with local people, but also the *necessity* of communicating the importance of what archaeology can offer to them.

Can we truly recognise “responsible and responsive collectors” without knowing them in advance? Perhaps not. But I believe we can *create* them through education—informing them about the best ways to help gather information about the human past.

In closing, I note my agreement with the final sentence of Thomas and Pitblado’s (2020: 1060) article: “It is also the personal responsibility of practitioners and scholars to work with the wealth of extant research and to move beyond stereotypes and easy polemic”. We should not paint *every* collector with the same brush; rather, we must carefully paint each individual with their appropriate colours.

References

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