21 December 2007

Rick Stengel
Managing Editor
Time Magazine
U.S.A.

Dear Mr Stengel,

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is surprised and disappointed that the editors of Time allowed a story such as “Antiquities: the Hottest Investment” to be published without providing a more balanced account of the myriad consequences associated with the trade in antiquities. Many of our members, comprised of those involved in archaeology and heritage issues in over 90 countries, read this article with utter disbelief. We call upon Time to retract its apparent advocacy of a practice that is so clearly detrimental to our understanding of our own human past and to make amends by informing its readers of the broader implications underpinning this article.

The direct link between the global antiquities market and the irreversible destruction – as a result of looting - of archaeological sites the world over is well documented. By blatantly encouraging readers to acquire archaeological material as a sound investment, this article stimulates fails to examine the nefarious consequences of collecting – artifacts ripped from the ground, the desecration of tombs and burials, temples and monuments all decontextualized and devoid of information that they might provide about past societies and beliefs of people in ancient times.

While the article begins by highlighting the sale of the Guennol Lion, a supposedly “legally acquired” antiquity (according to the laws and ethics of 1948), it fails to discuss the harsh realities that all too often these illegally excavated materials are leaving regions (usually less-developed) torn by war and/or economic distress, coming into wealthy (more economically developed) countries through a series of illegal maneuvers.

Your article cites two antiquities dealers, who make their living by stimulating demand for these objects. It unashamedly promotes the valuing of these objects as investments (as well as their value as markers of taste and wealth). Nowhere in the article is the value of these pieces as archaeological artifacts mentioned. Unfortunately, whenever an ancient object is removed from its context, it obliterates most of the clues that archaeologists and others can use to interpret and understand the past.

The depiction of antiquities as legitimate objects for investment is extremely disturbing in its disregard for international law regarding cultural property. Behind every object that surfaces on the antiquities market is a story that more often than not is one of illegal export, questionable provenance, possible forgery, regions racked by civil unrest or economic hardship, and gaping holes left in the ground or on temple walls. In truth, it is difficult to describe or imagine the degree of destruction that takes place in order to find one small object worthy of the antiquities market. Global trafficking in antiquities leads to destruction of archaeological sites and loss of information about cultural heritage. The article points to a serious issue that has arisen since the invasion of Iraq- the loss of that country's cultural property. The statue depicted in the piece is described as coming from a "dig near Baghdad." It is no part of the practice of archaeology to provide objects for economic consumption.

In addition, objects that were originally placed with burials are frequently targeted by looters when searching for material for sale. The practice of investment in antiquites is clearly linked to the destruction and disrespect shown for human graves. By urging investment in all types of objects, Time is positioning itself as an advocate for a dehumanizing practice.

We would call your (and your readers' and writer's) attention to the Red Lists published by the International Council of Museums as an attempt to trace some of the hordes of objects coming out of Afghanistan, Africa, Iraq, and Latin America to satisfy the acquired tastes of collectors (http://icom.museum/redlist/). These lists represent only a small portion of a much larger phenomenon that supplies the "increased interest in art and antiquities as an investment" that your article promotes. This amounts to the destruction and commodification, for the sake of vanity, of someone else´s valued heritage.

The article notes that recent laws have restricted the importation of antiquities. These laws were passed for good reason and it is irresponsible to consider only their impact on the market and not on the cultural heritage they were designed to protect.

Tastes in collecting are shaped by dealers and by articles just such as the one you published on December 13. It seems unconscionable for Time to promote the collecting of antiquities in this manner, without addressing the broader consequences. We look forward to a more balanced and nuanced treatment of this subject by your magazine and greater accountability on the part of your editors. Considering the vast influence that Time magazine has among such a wide spectrum of the public, we ask that you consider running a series of stories in your magazine to counter the damage done by this article.

Yours sincerely,

Claire Smith
President