

UNESCO:

“The Real Price of Art” Lie

By Yves-Bernard Debie

FIG. 1 (above left): Ad from the first UNESCO campaign of October 2020.

The Palmyra funerary relief is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it is held under inventory number 01.25.1.

FIG. 2 (above right): Entry from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's online database corresponding to the object in figure 1.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322367?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=01.25.1&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1>

The year 2020 should have been marked by the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, but it closed instead with a striking demonstration of the organization's dogmatic assumptions, brought to light by its own press campaign presenting artworks allegedly looted from their countries of origin and sold to collectors on the art market.

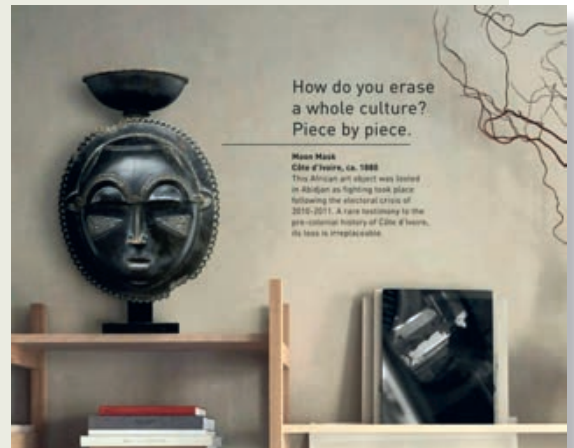
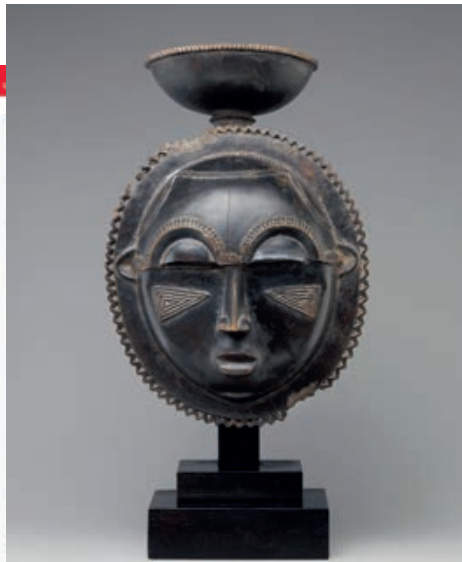
The massive advertising campaign called *The Real Price of Art* that was launched worldwide last October was a deliberate lie that identified art market professionals and collectors as thieves, fences, and the accomplices of extremist terrorist groups through the use of deceptive and doctored photographs. Being unable to provide any proof at all that “the illicit trade in cultural goods, [which] is estimated to be worth nearly \$10 billion each year,” UNESCO chose instead to back up its contention with just forged images.

Indeed, what could be more revealing than photographs of artworks in elegantly decorated contemporary wealthy homes with captions like “This African art object was looted in Abidjan,” “This priceless antiquity was stolen in

the National Museum of Palmyra,” and “This antiquity belongs to the Kabul Museum.” And since the investigation conducted by UNESCO, which of course would never lie, it was particularly efficient. It expressed such specifics as “This piece of Pre-Columbian art was looted in an illegal excavation by ‘subsistence diggers.’ It passed through two middlemen, crossed Costa Rica and Florida before being sold to an art dealer in Europe, who himself sold it through an auction house!”

Through “the weight of the word and the shock of the photograph,”¹ we are presented the striking revelation that cultural property—specifically the very artworks in the photographs—was looted and resold to wealthy collectors, making the art market an essential link in the chain of organized crime, since there can be no illegal trade without an end consumer.

Once the “proof” of organized looting is made and the connections with collectors are precisely established, the designated criminal is made guilty of more than just an infraction of the law but rather of an assault on morality or, better yet, a mortal sin. This elevates the doctrine to the status of an incontrovertible dogma. The captions beneath the photographs take care of this. A mask becomes “a rare testimony to the pre-colonial history of Côte



“ UNESCO’s press campaign is a complete setup and all of its charges are false. ”

d’Ivoire” whose “loss is irreplaceable.” A Buddha head becomes “this priceless item that was looted by local dealers and smuggled into the U.S. market.” A Palmyra bust makes us realize that “the trade in antiquities is one of the terror group’s main sources of funding.”

UNESCO is armed with unquestionable legitimacy after fifty years of experience in going after the illegal trade in cultural property. As such, these photographs supposedly prove its contention that The Real Price of Art means “supporting an armed conflict,” “erasing a whole culture—piece by piece,” and financing “organized crime”—in short, nothing less than “terrorism.” However, the idea that this is a noble institution appealing to the governments of nations to encourage their law enforcement organizations and courts to take increasingly harsh measures is nothing more than “fake news.”

UNESCO’s press campaign is a complete setup and all of its charges are false. The works presented as having been stolen by dealers, the pieces that were supposedly obtained by smugglers in the Andes, and the antiquities that would finance terrorism in the Middle East or lead to the eradication of African cultures are all sleeping peacefully in the museums that house them in Syria and Côte

d’Ivoire, and even in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The photographs that show these artworks in the homes of collectors are complete fabrications and the captions for them are blatant lies. *Fraus omnia corrumpit!*

No, these works were not stolen! No, they were not sold to unscrupulous collectors by dealers who colluded with organized criminals and helped finance terrorism. No, these pieces of cultural property come neither from looted museums nor illegal excavations. No, these beautiful African masks are not connected with the obliteration of African cultures. No, the real price of art is not crime!

I. UNESCO’S ORIGINAL PRESS CAMPAIGN

In October 2020, the UNESCO press campaign presented:

- 1) A funerary relief from Palmyra dated to AD 50–150 with the headline “Supporting an armed conflict has never been so decorative” and the caption “This priceless antiquity was stolen in the National Museum of Palmyra by Islamic State militants during their occupation of the city, before being smuggled into the European market. The trade in antiquities is one of the terror group’s main sources of funding.”

One can only conclude that the object in question (FIG. 1), “this priceless antiquity [that] was stolen,” was used for illustrative purposes only, because this very object is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which acquired it legally in 1901 (FIG. 2).

- 2) A moon mask from Côte d’Ivoire dated to about 1880 with the headline “How do you erase

FIG. 3 (above left): Entry from The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s online database corresponding to the object in figure 4.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/643506?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=2015.566&offset=0&pp=20&pos=1>.

FIG. 4 (above right): Ad from the first UNESCO campaign of October 2020.

The Baule moon mask was donated in 2015 to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it is held under inventory number 2015.566.

a whole culture? Piece by piece” and the caption “This African art object was looted in Abidjan as fighting took place following the electoral crisis of 2010–2011. A rare testimony to the pre-colonial history of Côte d’Ivoire, its loss is irreplaceable” (FIG. 4).

This mask, whose provenance is known from 1954 onward, also is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was acquired by a New York collector in 2003 at Christie’s auction house, and he subsequently donated it to The Met (FIG. 3).

- 3) A Buddha head from Afghanistan that dates to the fifth or sixth century AD with the headline “Terrorism is such a great curator” and the caption “This antiquity belongs to the Kabul Museum. In 2001, a large part of its collections was smashed into pieces by the Taliban. As the group was overthrown later that year, this priceless item was looted by local dealers and smuggled into the U.S. market” (FIG. 5).

These affirmations, like the others in UNESCO’s press campaign, are falsehoods, because this piece too, which has been documented for nearly a century, is also in The Met, which acquired it in 1930 after the 1927–1928 Trinkler expedition to Central Asia (FIG. 6). It has been presented in four major exhibitions in 1940, 1971, 2007, and 2012–2013.

- 4) A “Vessel with Head Neck” from Peru and dating to the fourth to sixth century AD, beneath the title “Art knows no frontiers” and with

FIG. 5 (bottom left): Ad from the first UNESCO campaign of October 2020.

The Afghan Buddha head is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it is held under inventory number 30.32.5.

FIG. 6 (below): Image of the head featured in figure 5.

Free download on the museum website: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38228?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ppft=30.32.5&offset=0&pp=20&pos=1>.

the caption “Before standing here, this piece of Pre-Columbian art was looted in an illegal excavation by ‘subsistence diggers.’ It passed through two middlemen, crossed Costa Rica and Florida before being sold to an art dealer in Europe, who sold it himself through an auction house” (FIG. 7).

This photograph is an Alamy stock image and the story of its illegal excavation and export to a collector by way of an auction house is a complete fabrication made up to support a hypothesis of international trafficking.

Upon learning of the fraudulent use of images of works from its collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art contacted UNESCO and demanded their immediate withdrawal. That could have been the end of it, but although UNESCO complied with this demand, it actually replaced the images with other photographs of artworks that had no more been stolen than those of The Met and similarly placed them in faked settings of elegantly decorated contemporary homes and, of course, with the same attendant captions, like “This African art object was looted in Abidjan” or “This priceless antiquity was stolen from the National Museum of Aleppo when the fighting was at its peak in 2014”—as if anything less than the peak of combat would have been insufficient.

II. THE MODIFIED PRESS CAMPAIGN

UNESCO’s new campaign now presented:

- 5) The statuette of a woman wearing a polos, 2650–2350 BC, with the headline: “Supporting an armed conflict has



“

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is a complete fabrication made up to support a
hypothesis of international trafficking

”

never been so decorative” and the caption “This priceless antiquity was stolen from the National Museum of Aleppo when the fighting was at its peak in 2014, before being smuggled into the European market. Illicit trade in antiquities is one of the main sources of funding of armed groups” (FIG. 9).

This affirmation surprises from the get-go because we know that Khaled Al-Masri, the director of the Aleppo Museum, had declared that despite the attack on the museum during the conflict, the collection and all of the antiquities in it had been entirely saved thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army and of the museum’s employees.² This is confirmed by video created when the museum reopened in 2019, which can readily be accessed online. The statue in question was still in Aleppo in 2019 and thus could not have been stolen in 2014.³

• 6) An early twentieth-century *tehe gla* mask from Côte d’Ivoire with the headline “How do



FIG. 9 (left): Revision of the ad in figure 1 from the modified UNESCO campaign. The statuette in the image remains in the collection of the National Museum of Aleppo.



FIG. 7 (above): Ad from the first UNESCO campaign of October 2020.

The photo of the Pre-Columbian ceramic is a stock image from Alamy.



FIG. 8 (right): Revision of the ad in figure 7 from the modified UNESCO campaign.

The source of the image of the ceramic has not yet been identified.



How do you erase a whole culture? Piece by piece.

Mask Téhé Gla
Côte d'Ivoire, early 20th Century
This African art object was looted in Abidjan when fighting broke out following the crisis of 2010. A rare testimony to the history of the Wé people of Côte d'Ivoire, its loss is irreplaceable.

Know the real price of art.

50 YEARS OF FIGHT
AGAINST ILLICIT TRAFFICKING
OF CULTURAL PROPERTY.



you erase a whole culture? Piece by piece” and the caption “This African art object was looted in Abidjan when fighting broke out following the crisis of 2010. A rare testimony to the history of the We people of Côte d’Ivoire, its loss is irreplaceable” (FIG. 10). And yet this mask appears in photographs taken in the Musée des Civilisations de Côte d’Ivoire in 2016 and so could not have been looted in 2010. It is still in the museum bearing inventory number 70.3.1 and was most recently illustrated in an article in the French magazine *Capital* on October 10, 2017⁴ (FIG. 11).

FIG. 10 (far left): Revision of the ad in figure 4 from the modified UNESCO campaign.

The We mask remains in the collection of the Musée des Civilisations in Côte d’Ivoire, where it is held under inventory number 70.3.1.

FIG. 11 (near left): Illustration from an article in the magazine *Capital* from 10 October 2017 showing the We mask that appears in figure 10.

<https://www.capital.fr/conso/en-cote-divoire-operation-rennaissance-pour-le-musee-dabidjan-1248807>.



• 7) An Inca vessel of more common form replaces the Moche one from no. 4 (FIG. 8). The commentary no longer mentions “subsistence diggers” nor being routed from South America to Europe via Florida involving an auction house and art dealers, but more simply of a Pre-Columbian Peruvian ceramic “crossing Ecuador” while being enmeshed in the shadowy world of international art trafficking. The image appears to link to the storyline about the same artwork, which was seized in Ecuador from a private owner and was the subject of an article published in February 2020 in the Lima newspaper *El Comercio*, but the specifics remain to be confirmed.

FIG. 12 (above): Ad from the modified UNESCO campaign showing an altarpiece panel from Saint Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium, painted by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck.

This object was in fact stolen, albeit in 1934, before UNESCO was founded.

The final “visual” in the UNESCO press campaign, an altarpiece panel by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck once in Saint Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium, unfortunately really was stolen (FIG. 12). This happened in 1934, ten years before UNESCO was created and nearly forty years before the adoption of the 1970 Convention. The fact of this theft becomes merely a service to a lie when one considers that it is introduced only to support the fantasy of an organized international trade that destroys cultures and finances organized crime and terrorism. The Preamble to UNESCO’s Constitution solemnly and rightfully declares that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

This grand and beautiful “United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization” was built in 1945 on the ruins of history’s most deadly conflict, and it should be well aware that it is through the instruction and education of peoples that wars can be avoided. Fighting against the indoctrination that leads a nation, a people, an ethnic group, or a village to seek the destruction of its neighbor—that foreign “other” who is different—is and must remain UNESCO’s primary mission. Today, and as ever, *scientia vincere tenebras!*

It is precisely because this institution is vital to humanity and because its goals are so clearly identifiable that one cannot accept seeing it become the victim of indoctrination as it blindly stigmatizes, without proof—or even worse, with fabrications—an art market that in reality contributes to the development of mutual understanding and good relations between peoples through the exchanges it encourages and promotes.

Those responsible for the creation of UNESCO’s The Real Price of Art campaign would have done much better to allow themselves to draw inspiration from the title of the Jan and Hubert Van Eyck’s stolen altarpiece panel, *The Just Judges*, and to emulate the acts of its subjects.

NOTES

1. Yet UNESCO has published a handbook denouncing fake news and disinformation (<https://fr.unesco.org/fightfakenews>).
2. (<https://www.facebook.com/1243156205755362/videos/524091351548065> – see 2 min 35 s).
3. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6YURAUghKA> – see 1 min 25 s).
4. (<https://www.capital.fr/conso/en-cote-divoire-operation-rennaissance-pour-le-musee-dabidjan-1248807> – photo taken in 2016).