

Looting of Greek treasures still prompts outrage

By JEANNETTE BAZ
COOPERMAN

Special to the Post-Dispatch

Archaeologist Michael Cosmopoulos spends summers at the site Homer called "sandy Pylus," piecing together the ruins of a Bronze Age palace. He has dug up at Mycenae, ancient Corinth, Ithaca, Eleusis, Oropos, Epidaurus and Olbia; he's excavated shipwrecks underwater. He knows the power of uncovering buried secrets.

For that reason, Cosmopoulos is determined not to say too much about his Dec. 9 lecture at the St.

Louis Art Museum, "The Gold Treasure of Troy and Other (In)Famous Stories of Art Looting." He has stories — true ones — to tell, stories of theft, smuggling, burial and discovery; international intrigue, covert

operations, even murder. The lootings span four millennia and end with the thefts from the Baghdad Museum last spring, and human nature alters very little.

Professor of archaeology and chair of Greek studies at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, Cosmopoulos was born in Athens, and his interests formed early. "It's not hard, growing up in Greece." He raises his hands, tilts them outward. "You are surrounded by antiquities. It's so easy to fall in love with them."

As an undergraduate at the University of Athens, he learned the story of the Elgin Marbles. Today, he calls them the Parthenon Marbles, neatly dissociat-

ing the British ambassador who had them hacked from the Parthenon and shipped to his estate.

Cosmopoulos studied similar cases while earning advanced degrees at the Sorbonne in Paris and at Washington University.

Looting is an ancient and some think inevitable practice, a reality of war and conquest. When the Romans occupied Greece in the second century B.C. and started taking works of art, the Greeks raised fierce protest. Ignoring them, the Romans drained Greece of originals and then mass-produced copies.

"There was a market," Cosmopoulos says with a shrug. "They would make statues without heads, and then you, the wealthy Roman, would have your head carved and placed on top."

Heinrich Schliemann must have felt the same impulse when he posed his wife, Sophia, in the magnificent gold headdress he'd unearthed at Troy, one of more than 9,000 gold and silver artifacts in a treasure worth more than \$1 billion.

"Schliemann was an extraordinary man," says Cosmopoulos, who is more ambivalent than most archaeologists about the discoverer of Troy. Many despise Schliemann, many worship him. Cosmopoulos sees him as a braggart who was both smart and lucky, a sloppy excavator and treasure hunter who became, because of his magnificent obsession, the founder of Bronze Age archaeology.

Most archaeologists believe Schliemann did find Troy. He dated his discoveries to about 1200 B.C., the time of the Trojan War, which had fascinated him since his childhood. After excavating other Bronze Age sites and doing comparative dating, archaeologists realized that Schliemann's findings predated the

Trojan War by a millennium.

The Indiana Jones part of the story started when Schliemann smuggled the treasure out of Turkey in the 1870s. Cosmopoulos, however, prefers to save those misadventures for his lecture.

"Let's move to 1945," he says. "The Soviets arrive. We know the artifacts are now in Berlin's Museum of Prehistory and have been moved into bunkers, but we don't know which one. One of the Soviets' Trophy Brigades — whose task was to go after art, because the Nazis had removed their art — finds the treasure in a huge bunker under the Berlin Zoo. They seize it, and the Soviet Union doesn't tell anyone for 50 years."

Two art historians traced the treasure — Cosmopoulos hints of "official documents," "a network burglarizing Russian museums" and "secrecy, even murder."

Fast-forward to the Baghdad Museum, where many believe international art dealers custom-ordered some of last spring's looting. "We have eyewitness reports of two waves of looters," says Cosmopoulos. "The first had glass cutters. They cut holes in the cases and removed the artifacts. They didn't smash anything. And they were

knowledgeable enough to take only the originals, not the copies."

He takes a deep breath. "I think we are to blame for not taking proper measures to guard the museum. I think everyone was surprised."

"The U.S. set up a rapid-response team headed by a Reserve officer who is an attorney with a classics degree," he said. "The FBI, the CIA and Interpol all went into action. And as a result, we have managed to retrieve many of the objects."

The number still missing? "If you listen to the Pentagon, about 40," Cosmopoulos says. "Realistic estimate? About 10,000, some of them small fragments."

Personally, he'd be as happy with a shard of clay as a gold headdress, "because neither has seen the sunlight in 3,000 years." Treasure doesn't tempt Cosmopoulos; nor would his wife, also an archaeologist, covet such gifts.

"We're interested in the information," he says. "How you see the past defines your identity. How do we treat our heritage, what do we leave for our children, and what does this tell us about our culture?"

"There, I've given the lecture after all," he says lightly, knowing he's only scratched the surface.

"The Gold Treasure of Troy and Other (In)Famous Stories of Art Looting"

What: A lecture by Michael Cosmopoulos, presented by the Archaeological Institute of America-St. Louis Society

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Where: St. Louis Art Museum Auditorium, Forest Park

How much: Free

More info: 314-432-3900

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