Philippe de Montebello, the director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the leadership of the Archaeological Institute of America have accused each other of being “radical” regarding the acquisition policies of American museums. Meanwhile, the operations chief of Italy’s art police has called de Montebello “an actor” in response to comments and criticism the Met director voiced during a recent talk at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Speaking at a Press Club luncheon this April, de Montebello called the leadership of the Archaeological Institute of America a “small group of radical archeologists.” He further asserted that the institute’s leaders do not represent the majority of their colleagues, whom he described as being “embarrassed by their peers’ agenda and the stridency of the current discourse.”

Two months after signing a precedent-setting accord to return six artifacts in the Met’s collection to Italy in exchange for loans of comparable importance, de Montebello also accused foreign governments of targeting museums in the United States without applying the same scrutiny to collections in Europe and Asia. “I must say, I am puzzled at one thing, which is the absence of claims against collectors and museums in Germany, the U.K., Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Japan, among others,” de Montebello said. “They were buying at least as much from the dealers now under indictment as the United States. And I think we should reflect on why only the U.S. is being targeted at the moment for claims.”

Spurred in part by evidence seized in a 1995 raid on a Swiss warehouse, the Italian government has embarked on an aggressive campaign to reclaim allegedly looted objects in American museums. The warehouse in question belonged to Italian dealer Giacomo Medici, who has been convicted of trafficking in looted antiquities and is appealing a ten-year prison sentence. Medici’s alleged conspirators, former J. Paul Getty Museum antiquities curator Marion True and American dealer Robert E. Hecht Jr., are currently being tried in Italy on charges of receiving stolen antiquities and conspiring to traffic in illegally acquired artifacts. True and Hecht deny any wrongdoing. Following Italy’s lead, Greece has also made claims for allegedly looted objects owned by the Getty.

At the Press Club luncheon, however, de Montebello defended the current acquisition policies of American museums, which allow for the purchase of antiquities without known provenances as long as they have been out of the ground for at least ten years, and argued that such practices can be protective rather than destructive. The Met director also questioned the right of countries to claim antiquities found within their borders and advocated the value of “universal” museums, such as the Met, which function as a “cultural family tree where people can find their roots.”

Asked to respond to de Montebello’s comments, Ferdinando Musella, operations chief of Italy’s art police, the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, told ARTnews, “He is an actor. This is not the same thing he said before, during, and after his negotiations with Italy. It is not the same thing he said when he heard about what we found in Switzerland.”

Musella added that Italy is indeed conducting investigations in other countries, and that officials will pursue other claims once its investigative work is complete in the United States, which he described as having “the first market for cultural her-
National News

hitage.” Pointing out that the agreement between the Met and Italy did not preclude future claims for allegedly looted art objects, Musella said of de Montebello, “It would be a great idea for him to retire very soon.” At press time, de Montebello could not be reached for comment on Musella’s remarks.

De Montebello, meanwhile, reserved his harshest criticism for the leadership of the Archaeological Institute. “The dispute between museums and archeologists has been engendered by the views of a small, rather radical, and vocal group,” who, de Montebello said, “believe and proclaim that all collecting, especially in the United States, is the reason for so much looting of sites. It is not. That all objects without a clear pedigree are looted. They are not.” He charged that, because of these views, the institute condemns not just the looters but also stigmatizes the objects themselves.

“These objects, looted or not, with or without provenance, are of course not only innocent but also valuable testimonies to our shared artistic heritage,” he said.

Jane Waldbaum, the institute’s president and a professor emerita of art history at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, disagrees with de Montebello’s assessment. “We are not a small, radical group,” she said. “We represent a large community of 8,000 members who share the same mainstream archeological ethics.”

Malcolm Bell III, the institute’s vice president for professional responsibilities and a professor of art history at the University of Virginia, calls the Met director’s comments “disturbing and surprising. The accusation that we are radicals is profoundly incorrect. In truth, he is the radical, espousing an outdated policy that results in illegality and the destruction of evidence.”

In his speech, de Montebello framed his position by condemning the looting of archeological sites while trying to explain the complex issues confronting antiquities ownership in an era of “pronounced nationalism.” According to de Montebello, “restrictive” guidelines implemented in recent years—including those issued by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD)—have “markedly diminished” the supply in the United States of unprovenanced antiquities, rendering American acquisitions of such antiquities “inconsequential.”

Art, de Montebello explained, has always been a “movable feast” that has “forever been sought and carried from one place to another.” He reminded his audience that “every work of art in the world’s collection ended up in museums as a result of a number of things: outright purchases, plunder, tribute, or, generally, war booty.” Roman sculptures and artifacts are today found throughout the Mediterranean basin, de Montebello said. In response to the proposition that such objects be returned to

their source country, the Met director asked, “Well, which country of origin? In many cases, there are many candidates.” Some argue that no object should be purchased without a proper export permit, but “no major source country grants export permits,” de Montebello countered. He proposed that antiquities-rich countries develop a licit market for material and cited the Japanese model, in which some objects are declared national treasures while redundant examples are granted export permits and sold. “There is no looting in Japan,” according to de Montebello.

A welter of national legislation, court decisions, and international treaties has further complicated matters, de Montebello said. For instance, in the case of the objects that the Met has agreed to return to Italy—including a 16-piece set of Hellenistic silver and the Euphrates krater, a Greek red-figured vase from circa 515 B.C.—the museum could have invoked the statute of limitations and retained the objects, but, based on the materials uncovered in the Swiss warehouse raid, de Montebello said, the “weight of evidence pointed to illicit activity and that we should seek to make things right.”

According to de Montebello, the Italian findings indicate that a network of dealers and tomb robbers, operating primarily in Tuscany and Sicily, “took advantage of a climate of laissez-faire in the museum world, a certain indifference to cultural property issues”—which he attributed partially to a “philosophical position” that questioned whether “all objects from one part of the world must remain in that part of the world.”

In his talk, de Montebello laid out the merits of this position, which supports the role of museums—wherever they are located—as protectors of cultural heritage. He dismissed the argument often posited by archeologists that “an antiquity that has been alienated from its context is of little or no value.” The “find spot” where an antiquity is discovered, he argued, is but “the last and final context of the work or art. Most works of art, most antiquities, did not originate in the ground. They were made to be used, they moved around, they traveled.”

In defending the AAMD guideline that allows museums to buy objects with uncertain provenance as long as at least ten years has passed since they were unearthed—a provision that some archeologists contend is a “loophole” that encourages dealers to simply hold on to looted material for that period of time before putting it on the market—de Montebello said that, on the contrary, the allowance was a “fail-safe.” It ensures that “objects that are precious testimonials to our past are not lost forever and can be appreciated, studied, brought into the public domain where they belong—and where a potential claimant nation has a chance to find them,” he said. “That, as far as I’m concerned, is the high moral ground, not the discarding of objects for ideological reasons.”

He called on the leadership of the Archaeological Institute to “engage with museums in a civil discourse in good faith, in an open dialogue to resolve our differences.” But he rejected the idea advocated by archeologists and museums in the United Kingdom and Germany of using 1970—the year the UNESCO Convention banning the import, export, or transfer of ownership of cultural property was passed—as a cutoff date after which no antiquities of uncertain origin could be acquired by museums. “That,” said de Montebello, “is the capitulation to a political agenda and a betrayal of a museum’s basic mission and purpose, in this case the rescue and preservation of objects of great esthetic merit and intrinsic cultural significance.”

—Kelly Devine Thomas