

September 5, 2001

Mr. Philippe de Montebello
Director
Metropolitan Museum of Art
5TH Ave., at 82nd St.
New York, NY 10028

Dear Mr. Montebello,

I write this letter in reference to the recently published book, *The Lie that Became Great, The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures* (Styx Publications, Groningen 2000) written by a senior member of your research staff, Oscar White Muscarella, an ill-argued and fantasy-ridden book that I'm afraid may ultimately tarnish the reputation of your esteemed institution. No publisher or reviewer would have favorably looked at such a haphazard listing of biased and unsubstantiated allegations if not for its author's claim of curatorship at the Met. Nor would your own bookshop carry such a book if not through the influence and manipulations of its author as staff member. Mr. Muscarella's book is a disservice to the advancement of archeological studies, and a publication that the Met should be dissociated from.

Discovering proof of forgery

Forgery is a subject that has long interested me, and I too have published articles on this topic, the latest being the introduction section to the *Forgery* entry of *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (which is followed by a Muscarella-added section and may now result in the unfortunate association of my name with his). But I take the matter seriously and would not dare pronounce myself on an item without proof and substantial evidence.

Some twenty year ago I had acquired a silver plate in Paris against the advice of a dealer friend who saw it as problematic and of dubious provenance. A decade later, I saw it as a forgery as well, but for every argument against its authenticity, I could also find one in support of it. I took the plate to LACMA where after a brief inspection, LACMA's chief conservationist, Peter Meyers, saw nothing wrong with it. Then I began to provide information on its provenance and point out negative aspects of the plate. He immediately stopped me and gathered all his staff and asked me to repeat the story. He explained that this was not the type of information that his conservation staff was usually exposed to and wanted them to benefit from it. He then reexamined the plate. After an hour of elaborate search under a powerful microscope that projected the details of the plate on a screen, a concrete proof of forgery was found: there were tiny aging spots (probably acid-induced) in an area that could not have occurred naturally. At that point the piece could be pronounced to be fake.

I relate this story to show that a serious researcher such as Peter Meyers, would not—a priori—disregard dealer related information as baseless, and would use all available knowledge to guide him towards a technical proof. Without technical proof, one has to build a strong case—pro or con—based on stylistic analysis and historical evidence. Mr. Muscarella's methodology rests neither on this nor on that. Oscar White only sees in terms of black and white. If an item is officially excavated, it is authentic, and if not, it is probably a fake.

Occasionally, Muscarella adds another criteria to his previous one: unparalleled designs are also proof of forgery. It is thus that on the occasion of his trip to Houston when I brought up the issue of the glazed bricks that were uncovered and looted in the midst of the war waged by the Islamic Republic of Iran's government in the province of Kordestan in the early 1980's, Muscarella's reply was that they were unexcavated and with unparalleled designs, therefore forgeries. Thermo-luminescence tests of course proves him wrong.

High-morality pretense

Muscarella's lack of methodology notwithstanding, the principal objection to his book is the high moral tone that he adopts in condemning archeologists whom he accuses of collusion with dealers, and museum people that he accuses of bending or falsifying truth to please museum patrons and prospective donors. But given the opportunity, Muscarella himself behaves in the exact same manner that he criticizes his colleagues for.

A point in case is the publication of *Ancient Art, The Norbert Schimmel Collection* (editor O.W. Muscarella, Mainz 1974), and its star piece (no. 161), a silver shallow bowl with four ibexes that he has proclaims to be fake in his new publication (*The Lie*, p.336). He does not mention this revelation as a new discovery, which means that—right or wrong—this was his belief all along. This begs the question: why didn't he object to it then? Granted that the entry on that particular item was written by Wilkinson and not by him, but as editor of the publication, Muscarlla's name at the beginning of the book was a seal of approval on its content. An honest editor would have mentioned his reservation about the entries that he didn't agree with. Like all those he criticizes, Muscarella sold his integrity for the sake of having his name on the publication. In return, he bestowed lavish praise on his new-found patron and paid tribute to the two years of close cooperation that he had with him (read: accepted all his wishes). His only complaint: Norbert Schimmel was "solely responsible for the layout"!

His main argument for the forgery of the Schimmel bowl is that its alloy only contains 81% silver. He does not give any explanation as to why such percentage is an indicator of forgery. The Oxford labs that have analyzed a large quantities of silver objects, recognize that pre-Achaemenid silver content can go as high as 92%, Achaemenid ones are near 80% and that Sasanid ones can go as low 50% (see attached report in appendix 1). Unless Mr. Muscarella can show a magical problem inherent to the number 81, his citation of silver content for the Schimmel bowl is a perfect example of how he has used phony evidence to dazzle his publisher and convince him to print his rubbish.

A section of *The Lie* is devoted to Elamite bitumen roundels (p.130) where he criticizes the South Caspian attribution as a dealer fabrication, and advocates Southwest Iran because one excavated roundel was found in Susa and another near Haft Tapeh. By this argument the Egyptian statue of Darius excavated in Susa should be attributed to a

Susa workshop! The more correct argument—as any archeologist who has worked in Iran should know—is that bitumen was not found in the Southwest Caspian region but near the oil fields of Southwest Iran. Whether he reached his conclusion through right or wrong arguments is a secondary issue here. The primary issue is that if he knew—as he proclaims in *The Lie*—that these were from Southwestern Iran why didn't he correct the entry (by Harper) for a bitumen roundel in the Norbert Schimmel collection (no. 151) attributed to Southwest Caspian? Was it in deference to his collector-patron and his reliance on the information provided by the dealer he had bought the roundel from?

The previous example also shows how Muscarella can switch arguments to his benefit. While all along his book he argues that artifacts traveled in antiquity, and the place an object was found is not necessarily its site of production, he uses the opposite argument here to proclaim a Southwest Iran attribution because two excavated roundels were found in that region.

Dealer-based forgery information

Most of the fake examples published by Muscarella are well-known fakes that any second rate dealer will not only identify but will provide better explanations than him. In regards to forgery, dealer information is crucial, and for every dealer that sells a forgery, there is one to expose him. Many of the more important forgeries were either revealed through dealers' rivalries, or because of financial disputes among various parties involved. Such is the case for instance of a glass plate recently sold to a Japanese collector, through a transaction that was not fully disclosed to the forger himself. Out of animosity towards the dealer, the forger testified that the plate was his creation. Such is also the case of the series of stone sculptures formerly in the Guennol Collection (*The Lie*, pp. 301-2) produced by an agrarian engineer of the Ministry of Agriculture in Tehran who practiced sculpture on his spare time and whose activities were exposed by rival dealers. Muscarella of course mentions without proof that these came from the same "workshop" and qualifies himself as an early "doubter" without giving any reason for his doubts.

The Luristan forgery myth

When it suits him, Muscarella uses dealer-based rumors of forgery without giving due credit. Inevitably, he gets entrapped in his own duplicity when dealers spread wrong accusations of forgery. One such case is his entrapment in the Luristan forgery myth.

Muscarella believes that in the field of middle-eastern antiquities it is common knowledge that many Luristan bronzes are forgeries. The basis for this "common knowledge" has never been clear to me and over twenty years that I have watched the Western art markets, I have not seen a single fake Luristan bronze. Recent events in the art market though provided me with an explanation for this bizarre common knowledge.

After the accidental discovery of the fabulous silver hoard of the Kalmakare grotto in Iran, silver objects from that find gradually trickled into the western art-markets in the early 1990's. Shortly after, the Iranian government rounded up hundreds of antique dealers and intermediaries, and as a result, the conduit for the silver hoard objects dried up. But within six months, lured by the high prices that these objects were fetching abroad, some of the Iranian intelligence officers in charge of the case managed to smuggle out a considerable portion of the confiscated items.¹ I for one came across, or

¹ Some of them were subsequently jailed.

saw photographs of, more than 60 of them. The sudden flooding of the market with these new items caught the dealers who had accumulated stock at the original high prices by surprise. In reprise and in reaction to those who were undercutting their prices they spread the rumor that the new arrivals were all fakes. Needless to say, none of them could actually point out a fake.

I suspect that the same phenomenon happened for the Luristan bronzes. Initial items, because previously unseen, fetched high prices but when the market was flooded with large quantities of objects—uncovered in a short of amount of time—the reaction of the dealers who had a high-priced stock was the same as in the case of the silver hoard: they spread the rumor that they were all forgeries.

Be that as it may, the enormous quantities of Luristan bronzes available on the market argue against forgery. Because bronze forgery is easily detectable and the low prices of Luristan bronzes does not provide economical incentive for forgery. But the rumor of forgery was music to the ears of Muscarella. He saw there an opportunity to reveal forgery on a massive scale. Unable to provide a technical or stylistic proof of forgery, he decided to build his case on a group of bronze roundels with a complex iconography for which the well-known French archeologist, Roman Ghirshman, had proposed an ill-argued explanation. Ghirshman had interpreted the standing priest with two "subhuman" figures sprouting from his head as Zurvan giving birth to the twins Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. Ghirshman's Zurvanite interpretation was quickly proven to be anachronistic and the projection of Ahura-Mazda as "subhuman" unacceptable to any form of Zoroastrian ideology. Amulets with two "subhuman" figures springing out of a crocodile head or other animals further negated the Zurvanite theory.

The important point for our discussion however is that an erroneous interpretation of its motifs does not make an item a fake. It is the scholar's duty to interpret a complex iconography. A plausible explanation, even though refuted subsequently, is certainly preferable to the type of bureaucratic listings with no expressed opinions that Mr. Muscarella generally produces.

Blurring the arguments in his usual style, and accusing of Ghirshman of complicity with the bazaar to have created this very complex and unprecedented iconography, he picks one element, the "en face" head that appears on this group of items as a main indicator of forgery. As soon as he spots one, Oscar White sees red and feels an urge to destroy it.

His first victim in this group is on P379 discussed on p. 83, a roundel for which he admits that the central "en face" motif might be authentic but then argues that the surrounding motifs were later additions, and therefore fake. By this logic, every half finished manuscript that was later completed must be rejected as fake. An additional work is a forgery only if it was meant to deceive. Added decoration to antiquities or ancient buildings does not make a fake out of them. But Muscarella's thrust of arguments is toward implicating Ghirshman and he insinuates the surrounding decoration to be modern forgery. But he is most disingenuous in this accusation because he doesn't bother to submit the item to a simple technical test. The brittleness of old bronze plaques notwithstanding, it is impossible to add new incisions on an oxidized bronze surface without showing bare bronze in the grooves. A quick look under microscope would immediately reveal any attempt to fill modern grooves with fake patina.

As for the rest of the roundels and similar objects that he has illustrated pp. 379-94, the "en face" accusation comes as a refrain. But none of these items show on the illustration any signs of stylistic faux pas. Fake bronze patina or oxidization, even if obtained through several years of burial under chicken manure and urine sprinkling (the favorite accelerated aging process of Iranian forgers), is easily detectable. Muscarella never discusses the problems of bronze oxidization. Chances are that he has not held in his hands—nor even seen—any of these items and yet he dares to pronounce them as fake.

The Kerman Stones

Another wholesale attempt to discredit a group of items is his attack on the so called Kerman stones to which he devotes a number of pages (. One of these items (*The Lie*, P485) is an item that I have previously published and belongs to the Art and History Trust ("AHT").² A few years ago, Mr. Muscarella asked me for a transparency of this item which he refers to as "weight." Along with the transparency, I sent him a note explaining that the item was certainly not a weight because it had a small and unstable base for a standing weight, and could not be a hanging weight since there were no signs of hook-wear under the handle of this handbag shaped item. I also added the suggestion that these type of items were probably ceremonial crushing tools because: 1- there was extensive mechanical rubbing on the handle, suggesting extensive handling, and also on the corners of the base indicating a movement like the sole of a shoe (which displays the same kind of wear on its two ends), 2- that the motifs on these tools are mostly water motifs (e.g. water waves, serpent-shaped god of water) or dense palm-tree plantations, which augured abundant rain and crop. It was probably used during plantation ceremonies in early spring. It seems that these explications were way above Muscarella's capacity for understanding basic causal relationship as he neither wrote back to me nor reflected any of it in his article in the *Bulletin of Asia Institute*.³

The one element however that he did retain from my note was the word "mechanical." He used it to get back at me by qualifying the AHT crushing tool as too "mechanical." What he meant by that he did not explain. Did he mean that too large a surface had been drilled through the stone? Probably not, because in terms of surface of drilling, many of these crushing tools have a large open area under the handle. Did he mean that the *ajouré* carving was too intricate? Perhaps, but that would be negated by the example of an *excavated* piece, that although a fragment, displays a higher level of intricacy.⁴ As usual his main argument against the item was that it was not excavated, and then added a look-good argument by suggesting that it was "perhaps a recent copy of the (excavated) Soch piece".⁵ It really takes a "visionary" like Muscarella to make such a suggestion, for a close look would immediately reveal major differences between the two. One has very rounded elements (handle and snake cross-sections) while the other has square ones. In the so-called Soch piece (which I saw in 1978 at the Tashkent Museum) the two snakes are on two different planes while on the other, the two are intertwined and on the same plane. One is encrusted with colored stones and the other is not. One is black

² See Soudavar, A., *Art of the Persian Courts* (Rizzoli NY 1992, pp. 15 and 25, note 1.

³ Muscarella, O.W., "Intercultural Style 'Weights'" in *Bulletin of Asia Institute*, vol.7, pp. 143-53.

⁴ See *Early Mesopotamia and Iran, Contact and Conflict c.3500-1600 B.C.*, ed. J. Curtis, London 1993, p.86, no. 16.

⁵ Muscarella, *Bulletin*, p. 151

and the other is greenish. Finally, the "Soch" piece has a unique feature: it is the only piece to incorporate the handle into the body of the snakes (see appendix 2).

The only affinity between the two is the fact that they both display protruding snake heads under the handle. Muscarella seems to suggest that this is an exceptional design feature that automatically categorizes the unexcavated piece as fake. Again, his analysis is based on bad faith. Because, in the same article, in describing a broken head of a snake, he suggests that it was possibly "part of a weight like the one from Soch." He therefore implicitly admits that the shape with two protruding snake-heads was not so unique. Furthermore, in between the snake-head fragment and the Soch piece, it is the former which displays the strongest affinity with the AHT piece. Indeed, the snake head in both are square-shaped with closed jawed, while those in the Soch tool are round and open-jawed (see appendix 2).

Once a technical point was pointed out to him, it was incumbent upon Mr. Muscarella, as a scholar, to either change his theory or find a counter-argument. Perhaps in his imagination, the sign of wear on the handle and bottom of the Kerman tools was the due to months of hard rubbing by dealers and their families. But then he has to justify what incentive dealers had to do so. The rubbing has never been a selling point and no curator or museum person has to my knowledge considered it up to now as a sign of authenticity. If anything, the extensive signs of wear on these items constitute proof of their authenticity.

The fact of the matter is that Mr. Muscarella has not produced a single valid argument for the condemnation of any of the Kerman stones that he reproduces in his book.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the book's only merit is its title, which rather than describing the objects discussed therein, applies to the author himself, Oscar White Muscarella, The Lie that Became Great.

Respectfully yours,

Abolala Soudavar

CC: LACMA, Freer Gallery of Art, Musée du Louvre, British Museum

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ANALYSIS AND METALLOGRAPHY OF A PRE-ACHAEMENID SILVER VASE

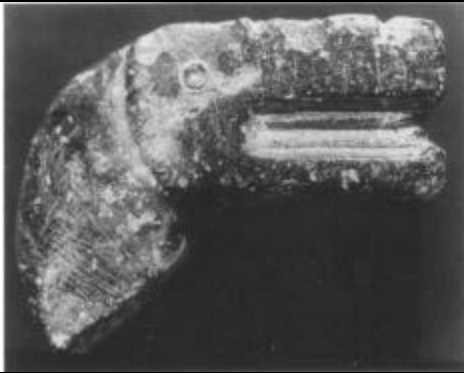
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recently, very little pre-Achaemenid silver from Iran had been analysed. However, a group of silver vessels from the same area and period as this vase has been analysed at Oxford. The most important features of these analyses are summarised in the accompanying graphs of copper, gold, lead and bismuth contents.

Over twenty analyses are now available in the Oxford database. The alloy content of this pre-Achaemenid silver varies from 0.73% to 11.76% copper. Essentially the distribution of copper contents is bimodal, with one cluster from 0.5-2%, and a second from 3.5-6.5% with a tail skewed to higher values. The alloy used in this vase is thus at the higher end of the range for this group of material but still well within it. There is a very visible difference in the way the two alloys are employed, the finer metal being used for thinner sheet than the rather more base material. Typically the fine silver sheet will be less than 1.5mm in thickness, while that with the higher copper contents ranges from 1.5-3mm; the present vase is actually on the borderline between the two with a probable sheet thickness of 1.5mm. This relatively more base silver is also used for cast parts. It is interesting to note that as time progressed the range of silver finenesses used in ancient Iran widened considerably: Achaemenid silver can exceed 20% copper at its most base while Sasanian silver can reach 50% copper or even more. One important difference between the pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid silver on one hand, and the Sasanian on the other, is that the latter made use of many castings, and these tend to be the most base.

As analyses accumulate, the gold contents of this pre-Achaemenid silver are increasingly group into a single distribution; this is near normal but skewed somewhat to the left. The present vase falls within the modal range of 0.4-0.5% gold. The lead distribution for pre-Achaemenid silver is bimodal; the 0.47% lead recorded is in the within the modal range for the higher of the two peaks (0.4-0.5%). There is also a significant bismuth impurity of 0.11%; many of the high copper group of pre-Achaemenid silver have similar bismuth contents in the range 0.1-0.2%. It is perhaps noteworthy that the lead and bismuth contents of the fine silver group are lower, possibly the result of a different

Appendix 2



Snake-head fragment

The AHT tool

(↖ signs of wear)



The Tashkent ("Soch") tool