

## Black market in antiquities

Peru is struggling to save ancient treasures from grave robbers, but dealers insist the artifacts are safer elsewhere

By Caitlin Randall  
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Lima, Peru  
Miguel Antonio is a grave robber. His family, like hundreds of others that live in the desert shantytowns surrounding Lima, earns a sparse living selling the pre-Columbian artifacts that were buried here more than 1,000 years ago.

"I steal from these graves for money," he says, standing in front of a one-room shack, home for his family of four. "If I could find work, I'd leave this place forever."

Miguel, who learned the trade from his father, says it is his wife who sells the pottery, textiles, and ceramic figures he steals from nearby graves.

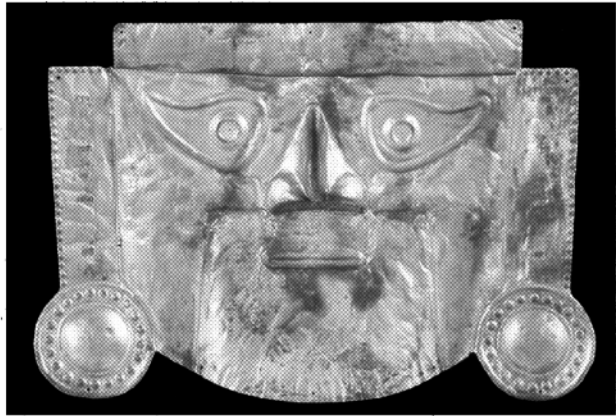
Several nights a week, Miguel and a group of six men head toward the desert and one of many ancient burial grounds.

"The first time I did this I was very young, maybe 12 or 13," says one of the men in Miguel's group, as he prods the desert sand. "It scared me to dig up someone's bones. . . . Now it's just a job."

The *huaqueros*, as the grave thieves are called in much of Latin America, pierce the ground with long

metal rods in search of pottery and textile swatches. Once a tomb is discovered, the scavengers dig down some seven feet, unearthing delicate pottery and exquisite fabric, which they sell to tourists, local collectors, and occasionally, if the find is truly special, to one of a small group of international dealers.

These looters, however, are only the foot soldiers in an estimated \$3 billion-a-year worldwide trade, museum officials here say. In Peru alone, customs officials say, more than 50,000 pieces of pre-Columbian and colonial artwork are smuggled out of the country each year. Like many of its Latin American neighbors, Peru forbids clandestine excavations. But ar-



Golden mask, part of Peru's artistic heritage — 50,000 pieces are smuggled out each year.

chaeologists say this plunder of artwork continues both here and throughout Latin America.

"The risks are bigger now and so is the cost of smuggling stolen art," says Hugo Ludena, director of the Peruvian Institute of Culture, "but as long as there is an international market for smuggled art, the illegal digs and art thefts will continue."

In recent years, however, Latin Americans have taken action against art smugglers, strengthening their own laws and forming international agreements to protect their "national patrimony."

In January 1981, US customs agents in Washington's Dulles Airport stopped a man returning from Lima on a routine check. According to the agents, the man's suitcase smelled odd, piquing their curiosity. When the traveler, New York art dealer David Bernstein, opened his luggage, the agents discovered a treasure-trove of pre-Columbian art — fresh from a grave. Among the artwork recovered were silver goblets, a feathered funeral shroud, a gold and silver death mask, and dozens of ceramic pots and figures.

### GRAVES from page 28

Later that same year, Peru and the United States signed a bilateral agreement pledging cooperation in the recovery and return of stolen archaeological, historical, and cultural property.

But importers, retailers, and collectors in the US complain that Latin America's crackdown on the antiquities trade may eventually do more harm than good. They argue that, without the international art market, much of the artwork recovered from grave sites in Latin America would have remained decaying in the ground or uncared for in local museums.

"As dealers we are preserving these objects and making them available for the world to appreciate. . . . I think the artifacts belong to the world, not just the country whose ancestors conquered the ancient civilizations," art dealer Lee Moore told the Miami Herald.

Indeed, between 2,000 and 3,000 mummy bundles from southern Peru sit in the basement of Peru's National Archaeology and Anthropology Museum — where, say the museum's critics, they are being destroyed by rats, mold, and neglect.

"Our major problem is money," says the museum's director of textiles, Edward

Versteylen. "When you consider the curator of this museum earns \$180 a month, you can imagine how little we have for excavations, restoration . . . anything."

"Quite frankly," says a former mu-

taken out of the country will last longer than those left behind." But archaeologists and museum officials say illegal digs destroy the archaeological worth of grave sites, while art-robbing obliterates a nation's link to its past.

"We have no literature to reveal our history," says Culture Institute director Ludena. "The artwork in the desert here is our connection to our past. . . . It is our national heritage."

"The police do what they can to protect the sites," says Julio Ubillus, a lawyer with the Peruvian attorney general's office who specializes in art-smuggling cases. "It isn't easy. Some of these places are miles from nowhere and known only to the *huaqueros*."

He and others applauded the US decision to act on a resolution by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which bans the import of artifacts without proper export papers.

The resolution has been signed by 50 artifact-rich third-world nations. Last year, the US became the first major art importer to sign. While the US signature does not carry full weight without support from other Western nations, it does give the president power to enter into emergency bilateral agreements with countries where the lure of the US market has resulted in serious pillage.

The Reagan administration, diplomatic sources say, has used the resolution in a kind of tit-for-tat agreement in countries where the drug trade flourishes. "They help us curb drug smuggling," says one



Ancient Peruvian 'portrait' pot