NEW DIRECTIONS
The Director Writes

In the next few numbers of *Expedition* I shall take a look at the Museum’s research in the field now and in the future. First, however, there is an immediate issue which faces everyone of us working in museums, and indeed everyone concerned with the investigation and explanation of the human past and the preservation of its remains.

For over six years Congress has been considering a bill—now known as HR 3403—to implement the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, ratified by the United States in 1972. The Convention seeks to control the international trade in cultural materials, especially in antiquities stolen from museums or clandestinely excavated from archaeological sites. House Bill 3403 seeks to implement the Convention in the U.S. by controlling and in certain circumstances preventing the importation of cultural properties which result from these illicit activities. The Convention and the Bill are bitterly opposed by many prominent art dealers and some museum professionals, who argue that unilateral action by the United States will do nothing to control a situation which it is the responsibility of the countries of origin to police. The Convention and the Bill are supported equally strongly by every national organization representing American archaeologists, every national American museum organization, and many of the nation’s largest and most important museums, including The University Museum.

The Bill, which enjoys the strong support of the Department of State, was introduced in the House on April 3, 1979 by then Representative Mitka of Illinois. It has been altered and much weakened in Committee, but still offers some useful means of implementing the UNESCO Convention. Perhaps as important, the Bill serves notice that this country will no longer by its very inaction countenance the looting of archaeological sites and ethnographic materials to feed the art markets, now growing ever more active as antiquities are purchased at ever higher prices as a hedge against inflation.

With its world-wide research, often in countries whose archaeological sites are subject to massive destruction by illicit digging, this Museum is in an excellent position to know just how vital it is that this Bill should pass into law. It is no argument to say that the destruction caused by looting is minimal compared with that brought about by modern development, forestry, agriculture, mining and the like. The point is, looting is specific, aimed precisely at archaeological sites because these produce the desired objects. Moreover, this is an agency of destruction which is avoidable. Countries like the United States, whose wealth still allows its citizens the privileged position of acquiring archaeological and ethnological materials from across the world, have a particular responsibility to use their ability with restraint and wisdom.

All friends of the Museum can help to secure the passage of HR 3403 by writing to their representatives in Congress and to members of the Subcommittee on Trade of the House Ways and Means Committee urging support for the Bill. I will be glad to let anyone interested have copies of the Bill and other relevant papers, as well as the names of members of the Committee.

The University Museum was the first museum in the country to go on record against the trade in looted antiquities with the Pennsylvania Declaration of 1970 (see facing page). The Museum’s new policy on acquisitions passed by the Board of Managers in 1979 strengthens the 1970 Declaration. Now we have a chance to back our words with action. Our tradition of scholarship and our long history of cordial relations with the many countries in which we excavate and study require that we support this urgent measure.

MARTIN BIDDLE