



Interview with Founder of Art Fraud Insights Colette Loll

By 2018-2019 LCCHP fellow Joy Naifeh

JN: I know you've done a lot in the art world. Can you give us a brief synopsis of your endeavors?

CL: In my role at Art Fraud Insights, I investigate suspect artwork and assist law enforcement agencies, museums, and collectors. I've also created museum exhibitions on fakes, forgeries, and the prolific nature of counterfeiting and fraud in the art market. Through these activities, I became involved with the world of cultural heritage protection. Essentially, I am involved in countering what I like to refer to as the "trifecta" of art crime: forgery, theft, and trafficking.

My interest in curbing the theft and trafficking of artifacts led me to my work with the Antiquities Coalition, a non-profit based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on combating the illicit looting and trade of artifacts. The search for innovative solutions moved me to look at technology as a means to solve some of the problems that we see in illicit antiquities sales and antiquities trafficking. Ultimately, this search led me to the SmartWater Foundation. SmartWater is an internationally accredited liquid 'nanotechnology' that is odorless, colorless, and invisible to the naked eye. This traceable liquid is coded with a patented forensic technology containing a unique signature that when brushed or sprayed on is completely undetectable except by ultraviolet (UV) light. When applied to artifacts, SmartWater provides information to law enforcement about an artifact's place of origin. It is a totally innovative application.

It's interesting how my activities intersect with one another. A forgery assails the truth while the plunder of an antiquity assails access to knowledge and context. Both distort the art historical record—and maintaining this record for future generations is where my real passion lies.

JN: I find your work with SmartWater fascinating! How are you maximizing the number of artifacts being marked with SmartWater, especially considering ongoing illicit excavation?

CL: Unfortunately, it is very hard to protect what is in the ground. But as a practical first step, we have spoken to several national boards of antiquities in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region to discuss applying SmartWater to objects that are being excavated in licensed sites. For example, part of a license to dig at a certain site would include a requirement to tag removed objects with a marker—like SmartWater—to permanently identify that those artifacts are the property of said country.

Like any market, ongoing demand drives a lot of the looting. By using technology like SmartWater, which can prove that an artifact is stolen, we introduce risk into the equation. This reduces the market's appetite for potentially suspect antiquities. SmartWater is a deterrent strategy as much as it is an object-specific provenance marker.

JN: Have you seen SmartWater work? Have there been smuggled pieces that you've been able to track?

CL: In the MENA region, we are just getting started, so we have not found smuggled artifacts tagged with SmartWater . . . yet! We've had one application in Syria, where we marked Roman mosaics and a museum collection at risk with SmartWater. In 2019, we expect to be marking museum collections in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. We anticipate marking hundreds of thousands of vulnerable objects next year alone. So stay tuned!

However, this year we saw SmartWater play a key role in the U.S. as part of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife sting operation—called [Operation Al Zuni](#)—involving counterfeit Native American jewelry. The [Indian Arts and Crafts Act](#) makes it illegal to sell counterfeit goods as authentic Native American cultural property. In this case, U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents intercepted a cargo shipment of counterfeit Native American jewelry from Southeast Asia. Agents marked this jewelry with SmartWater, let them move into the distribution system, and then purchased the goods at a gallery in New Mexico. Due to SmartWater, law enforcement could confirm that these were the objects that had been trafficked from Southeast Asia. The operation resulted in the first sentence in U.S. history for violating the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. It's also important to note that SmartWater is compliant with both the [Frye](#) and [Daubert](#) standards, which means that SmartWater evidence is admissible in U.S. State and Federal courts.

JN: Recently, there was a [record-breaking](#) auction of an Assyrian bas relief at Christie's. Experts fear that this sale will spark new looting in Iraq. In your work, have you noticed a correlation between high-profile auctions and an increase in fraud, forgeries, or looting?

CL: Fakes and forgeries follow market trends. Therefore, when you see an artist selling at a certain level, you tend to see more forgeries pop up of that given artist. This is a well-known phenomenon in the fine art world. But will looters go out and look for objects based upon the results of this auction? I think that's a hard connection to make for a few reasons. For one, you can't create ancient artifacts to suit market demand. Also, the majority of artifacts we see coming out of the MENA region right now are smaller, unprovenanced, and not museum-quality. Therefore, I think the issue is more multidimensional; we have to look at the conditions in source countries that allow these objects to be trafficked.

To reduce the risk of fraud, forgeries, and looting, we need to focus on consumer awareness. The fashion industry has long focused on consumer awareness to combat prolific counterfeiting. Especially effective are programs like "[You Can't Fake Fashion](#)," which was a campaign eBay introduced in 2013 to raise awareness about the implications of buying counterfeit luxury brands. I believe the art market should do something similar. A great example is the Antiquities Coalition's [Buyer Beware video campaign](#). The video highlights how buying unprovenanced, potentially suspect artifacts online can contribute to not only the loss of the historical record, but also to the funding of extremism and terrorism overseas. This connection is not one people normally make when they're buying artwork, but it's a connection that needs to be made, especially when potentially purchasing artifacts from the MENA region.

JN: I see that in addition to all these profound projects, you are also a doctoral student at Georgetown University. What is your research focus?

CL: My research focuses on how contemporary innovation in technology can solve the age-old problem of cultural plunder. I'm using ethical and philosophical pedagogies to frame questions such as, "How do we step in and support efforts to protect cultural heritage, especially in the Middle East?" I'm interested in various aspects of R2P—the [Responsibility to Protect](#)—which is generally applied to human rights. I am researching how R2P can apply to cultural property and validate or justify non-state, third-party actors stepping in to

protect cultural heritage on behalf of humanity. I'm also interested in our moral obligation to protect the world's cultural inheritance.

JN: Do you have any advice for individuals interested in entering the cultural heritage field?

CL: There are a lot of amazing cultural heritage warriors out there, and I am humbled to call myself part of this amazing group of people. It does not have to be your full-time job. Many people have other day jobs—such as lawyers practicing in other fields—and then work on cultural heritage projects on the side. You can do both, as long as you are willing to be fluid and give generously of your time. However, I am not going to lie, this can be a hard field to monetize.

I'll use myself as an example. Currently, I am running my business, have a role as a Senior Advisor to a nonprofit foundation, and serve on several task forces and advisory boards. These combined roles allow me to apply my expertise and passion, utilize my project-management and fundraising skills, and apply my knowledge of technology all towards the arts and culture sector. I'd like to think I'm part of a new breed of cultural entrepreneur.

Also, to participate in this field, I think you have to be willing to broaden yourself so that you can understand the various professional perspectives. Over the summer, for example, I attended the Tulane Cultural Heritage Law Program in Siena, Italy. I'm not a lawyer, but I studied for six weeks with law students learning about the international legal instruments used to protect cultural heritage. I did this because I wanted to understand the complex legal tools and language when I'm working with lawyers on various projects. It was an exceptional program that I highly recommend to practitioners in the field. This summer, I'm planning to attend an archaeological field school because, while I'm not an archaeologist, I need to be able to talk with archaeologists and understand what they are dealing with in the real world. I think having that open-mindedness is key; we can obviously respect each other's different views and languages, but we also have to be willing to understand one another's professional focuses and biases in order to unite under the umbrella of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Finally, you really have to believe in what you are doing. I believe we have an obligation and am driven by this higher purpose—to focus on truth, authenticity, and the preservation of the art historical records for future generations. It's a mighty goal, but it's at the core of my being.

Oh, and I love catching the bad guys, too. There's nothing wrong with putting a couple of people in jail along the way