

MICHAEL SCHARF WITH DOUGLAS ROTHSCHILD
& ALISSA QUART

Report: At the Met

Douglas and I went up to the Met yesterday afternoon,
Sunday, April 19, 2003—I brought a sign—Alissa met us
there—I stood w/sign on the sidewalk by steps near the
central set of railings that leads to the entrance—text:

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Country built on plunder.

“Free” Markets DESTROY history.
people and their arts

\$lavery’s legacy Unspoken and Unpaid.

Native
512 Nations Obliterated.

Who Stole *Iraq’s Past?*

Whose is *Next?*

Enjoy the “Egyptian Wing”

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Some encounters:

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Well-heeled senior couple—he “agrees absolutely”—she’s
furious, fixating on provenance of items in Japanese muse-
ums—they stay quite a while—Doug in long conversation
with the guy—he, Egyptian-born Jewish—she, a WASP
Brit—married 56 years—“He was probably fighting age as
Rommel crossed the Libyan border,” Doug says later.

- Af-Am kid ~ 15 on bicycle stops to read the sign. I say it's a response to the sackings, describe a little of what happened—nods.

- Two young guys from India—one notes “There are more Egyptian artifacts here than anywhere except Egypt”—gets into v. long conversation with Doug, other guy not wanting to talk.

- Oldish white guy with slight Euro accent—“That’s what happens. War is Hell.”

- Little crowds sort of form and dissipate of people reading—mostly not commenting but trying it out—talk to some, say it's a response to the looting, which US force under Geneva convention was obliged to prevent—drawing links to earlier Empires’ plundering and, at v. least, enablement of the movement of such objects—objects landing here via robber baron collectors—compromise resolution of provenances only begun in recent years—(had looked up Dendur—apparently Nasser gave it to the US in 1965—I can't imagine how that happened*)

Keep trying to focus on polit. consequences of this loss: on physical loss, on symbolic role it is likely to play, on how much it is congruent with this country's actual history—just rolling over things in the way of doing business and getting at resources—

Careful to point out that de Montebello and others in “museum community” desperately trying to mop up (partially no doubt b/c of the remaining shaky standing of much of what they hold)—two US interior minsters have resigned—need to communicate that citizenry cares about loss of life and culture even if govt determined to destroy and remove and make it look like benign neglect—

Alissa's interviewing people and taking pictures—three museum guards seemingly on break or recon. very enthusiastic—all young—one white, one mid east, one latino—then craggy hipster looking guy on bike—AQ later says he was an RTmark-er—many others.

*Douglas re: Dendur: “they build the aswan high dam . . . it was going to flood out this ancient valley filled (?) with antiquities—specifically the ‘huge legs of stone’ seen (?) & (or) reported by shelley in his poem . . . the reality is that the legs, unlike in the poem, are attached to the huge seated bodies of Ramses the great . . . anyway, they had to move these to higher ground.

“the international community sent tons of money to pay for the movement in return for the \$ and help, ‘we’ negotiated the ‘removal’ of some of the antiquities that were not going to be moved . . . so as the waters of the new lake nasar were licking at the base of the stones, the temple (having been hand picked by the prezident’s wifey) was dismantled & trucked away. Years later Jackie O was known to refer it as ‘my temple.’

“most of the above can be read on the walls of the museum when you go into the temple room itself.

“(i don’t know when the exhibit opened, but i’m pretty sure it was not on view till the 70s)”

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Older Ossie-Davis-looking guy: “Are you crazy? You must be crazy.”

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Young South Asian woman—sort of a moddish page-boy-like hair cut—asks if she can take my picture with the sign—“I’m going to take this back to Pakistan.”

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Cop tells me to keep moving. I say, I’m on the sidewalk. She says, it’s the Met’s sidewalk, and they don’t condone political activity—I say, I’m just standing here, and there’s no way they

own the sidewalk—she says, they do, from 81st to 88th, I'm just informing you—I think, if I move around a little for a minute or two she's done her job, and we can do another round if necessary—I say “ok”—she drifts off—I move around a little—seems to work . . . this I think though would be a problem with more people in an organized thing—and there's no way the Met can actually have control of “their” sidewalk, is there? They were granted that land I think as part of Central Park . . . ??

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Kid rock looking guy—small blue eyes—long, shiny thin mouse brown hair dyed appealingly and lightly blond—rangy guy, tall—very thin—maybe 30—little mounds and white opaque calluses on his white outstretched hand—says—

You see this hand [visibly shaking]?
This is a working man's hand.
Hands like this built this country.
Get a job.

Looks me in the eye threateningly. I'm in a bourgeois panic and have no response. I don't say: you're right: I don't have hands like that and hands like that built the country, but why shouldn't I point out that those who did the majority of the labor of industrializing the US were not given equal share, and that the neglect and destruction of the work of people over centuries in Iraq/Mesopot. is just like the govt's neglect and destruction of working people here? He stalks off with girlfriend. Need to learn from this.

(I do think though this is the way to draw the link—plunder of the US labor and natural resources similar to artifact plunder or its enablement—need to be able to articulate this clearly.)

Hilarious touch—as we're walking a little about 10 minutes later, pass him going in the other direction—our eyes catch, and he immediately gives me a sign—his hand makes and “L”-like shape, and he bangs it into his forehead repeat-

edly—I'm completely freaked out and scared that it's some Nazi thing—Doug laughs and tells me it's "Loser" . . .

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Two young British women and their silent male companion—middle class but Yoof affected—plus a white UFT guy (old school, graying, base ball hat—has glommed onto us and been yelling at people—challenges one woman as to why for the war—one says "I have my reasons" and the guys says—"What are they??"—and she just looks at him—and he repeats it, with maniacal glee—and she says, "I can't listen to this"—and turns quickly with other bird in tow—sentry looks at us sympathetically—and follows.

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A white German-looking guy with professional-looking video equipment is filming us, sweeping the crowd of steps and back.

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An Af-Am guy w/close cropped hair and wraparounds late 20s early 30s—w/two friends—he stops to talk and they keep going—specifics of the library and museum sackings—some back and forth over how it could have been prevented—I get to that I didn't know what else to do except make this sign—as he's leaving: "I'm with you, you keep doing your thing."

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Doug meanwhile in long, friendly but pointed exchange with white stocky Gulf War vet now TV news cameraman over whether the troops could have prevented plunder—chipping away at his story—but the yelling guy keeps interrupting, escalating.

Seems like debate, but Doug says not really:

"i know why i get angry when rich people go on and on about tax cuts, but what makes the pro war people so angry about people who are against it?

"it's like being mad at a fan of the losing team in a sporting

event . . . oh, those people are angry too? i never figured out what made the winning fans so angry & mean either.

“probably not the same thing though.

“the WAR people don’t act like winners, they act like you are really threatening them . . . ”

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Woman in mid 30s with Spanish-speaker’s accent—“Yes, and? They were going to come and kill us.”

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Realizing standing there that “Who Stole . . . ” is a page right out of Baraka—

Ok—but wld. he see as another theft—

later recall Steve Burt remarking (remarking ironically, since was re: deep image or something) that when members get proprietary over techniques, literary movements fall apart—but yet, materialist analysis in a way yields allusions and (even unconscious) steals as stolen labor—art and market capital share this quality—the knock-off—the sellable parody—the incorporation—who gets to go home after this?

the sign as pressure valve

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Sun setting behind museum—different little groups catching last warm patches—lots of eyes on the sign but no one wants to talk—lots of fatigue.

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White woman 40-50—middle class brown hair loose shortish and a little frizzy—thick but not overdone lipstick—looking intently, looks up slow—“The whole time we were in there I was thinking: what if we came in here and stole everything? How would people here feel about that?” Pause. “We should do it.”

Eyes far off imagining it.

I don't know if it is the same man as earlier, but as we are walking toward the park to leave, an older white man says "This is what happens in a war. It is a terrible thing."

Doug:

"Thoughtful, pensive man, with very sad eyes—& what i thought to be a 'slavic' look & a strange unidentifiable accent. We talked of war a bit & it was discovered that he had fought in Europe in WW2. 'I was happy to be in Europe, i was from Europe & i was glad not to be in the Pacific, i can't take the heat. I like the cold, but i can't stand the heat, & the humidity.' & the bugs i sd.

"After a bit he told us a story from his childhood. He was born just before WW1 in a small farming community somewhere in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (He referred to 'the Emperor' and 'soldiers fighting in France & Russia & Italy.' He didn't seem too German, though he didn't want to say exactly where he was from. I would think a German wouldn't have sd. 'Emperor' for Kaiser . . . who knows?) [M: I think he was Hungarian.]

"So he told us this story, from his village of 2,000 people—half men, half women, 1/3 too young, 1/3 too old—so maybe of about 340 men, 86 were killed at the front. & when the war ended & the soldiers were going home (presumably the German soldiers, finding their way back to Germany) they stopped in this town which had a distillery that made Liquor from sugar beets:

"The smell from the beet factory was terrible & the soldiers [sic] got drunk. & they opened all the taps in the distillery & the fermented beet juice & the distilled beet juice liquor ran all through the streets & the priests went to the soldiers to beg them to close the taps on the vats of alcohol, because they were afraid that if someone threw a match into the street, the whole town would burn down. & the soldiers sd. no.

"& somehow he seems to have ended up in America? and returned to Europe at what? the age of 36 or even 40 to fight

some other war? Though my suspicion of him was {as i am a suspicious man} that he had been in the Wehrmacht. & given his age, pressed into the Volksgrenidier toward the end of the war . . . who knows . . .

“He walked with us a bit, musing on what life brings. Chatting slowly—giving space in the conversation, he would think of something and quietly brush away the silent pause.”