



RESPONSE

Response to “A Case Study of Academic Facilitation of the Global Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects: Mary Slusser in Nepal,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* (2023), 1–20, Emiline Smith and Erin Thompson

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While I believe that the authors, Emiline Smith and Erin Thompson, have legitimate concerns regarding the theft of cultural objects, I consider that, in the article “A Case Study of Academic Facilitation of the Global Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects: Mary Slusser in Nepal”, *International Journal of Cultural Property* (2023), 1–20, the authors present a number of serious misrepresentations.

In focussing almost entirely on a book published in 1982, I believe that they have misrepresented the motivation and intentions of Dr Slusser (1918–2017). Much has changed since the Slussers moved to Nepal in the mid-1960s, especially curatorial practice and opportunities for women.

When Dr Slusser moved to Nepal in the 1960s, women did not have the access and privileges of equal opportunity that women in the 2020s enjoy. As a female, academic spouse with no children, whose husband was on a State Department posting to Nepal, Dr Slusser would have found herself unable to obtain a work permit, and, as she has stated, was not prepared to spend her time with other Embassy spouses, recreating in Katmandu an approximation of her life back in the USA. With her acknowledged curiosity about other cultures and the fascinating environment in which she found herself, it seems entirely appropriate that she sought to begin to understand the history and culture of the Kathmandu Valley and to try to interest other foreigners in Nepal. To claim that her writings and collecting were driven by a drive for financial gain is, I believe, totally erroneous. Her abiding concern was the dissemination of knowledge.

The author’s generalization that all academics facilitate the illicit trade in cultural goods is a gross misrepresentation of the driving force behind most academic endeavors. This is not to suggest that academic work has not been used to legitimize white-collar crimes by dealers whose prime focus is financial gain; however, I would contend that most academics pursue their research in order to advance knowledge and understanding. What is more, having known Dr Slusser, I firmly believe that this was her major focus.

The authors of the article have also neglected to demonstrate an understanding of the extent of poverty in a developing country. In Kathmandu, as in other developing countries in the 1960s and 70s, it was common practice for peddlers to offer foreigners “souvenirs.” The authors’ statement that she was selling heritage because she did not care about it (p. 16) is a completely false assumption. It is certainly regrettable that many valuable family heirlooms

have been sold to wealthy tourists so that a family might eat or obtain necessary medications. However, a lack of interest in such items does not solve the underlying issues of poverty in countries like Nepal, nor does it further the understanding of different societies.

The assertion that Dr Slusser believed that “articles were better off in the West” (p. 3) is another incorrect assumption. While she may have originally thought that paintings and some sculptures could be more effectively conserved at institutions in the USA and Europe, to adopt this as her consistent position is too simplistic.

Importantly, the authors neglect to mention her association with the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and her attempts to have various items returned to Nepal. She was a founding member of KVPT and her research, scholarship, and documentation of the valley have proved invaluable to its conservation projects.

A case in point is a recently returned wooden temple strut. The strut was in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Thanks to Dr Slusser’s efforts, an approach was made to the AGNSW to repatriate this artifact. In the intervening period, a replacement strut on the same temple was stolen and sold on the illicit goods market. The wooden temple strut was returned to Nepal in July 2023 and placed in the Patan Museum. Dr Slusser and the Smithsonian Institution, where she worked in an honorary position, played an important role in the construction and development of this museum.

The authors’ apparent contention that Dr Slusser was driven by greed and self-aggrandizement is a misrepresentation of a long and highly-regarded international career. Dr Slusser was a woman who worked hard for her recognition, which was achieved through her continuing passion and curiosity about Asian cultures, in particular the culture of Nepal.

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