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## ISIS, Art, and Barbarism

By Lucy Steigerwald

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As they've wanted to do, last week ISIS released a video of their grim work. This time, the victims in their propaganda piece were not human beings but priceless artifacts housed in the Mosul, Iraq museum. "The Prophet Muhammad commanded us to shatter and destroy statues. This is what his companions did later on, when they conquered lands," says one man in the video. In short, their warped version of Islam says to do that, and to burn the Mosul library and its precious, ancient books. Nothing surprising there, but it's still tragic.

The Islamic State is not alone in their desire to purge the earth of competing cultures, even in the form of ancient art or other lovely, human things. Watching them gleefully destroy such treasures is still sickening. Human life is more important and irreplaceable than objects, but you can't go unbreak rare art or remnants of old civilizations either. It is sacred and rare, and you're wrecking it. You're an asshole, and your goals should be thwarted at every turn.

And yet, knowing full well that the earth would be better if ISIS weren't on it, the outrage over that theocratic terror-mob's cultural butchery is also convenient and myopic. Yes, other groups such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda make a habit of iconoclasm. (As Christians did back in the day). This is said to be their interpretation of radical Islam. However, this is sometimes too simplistic.

The idea that radically religious people act only because of those beliefs is foolish. So is the idea that you can tell the difference between political actions and religious ones when they are tied together so tightly. For example, back in early 2001, the Taliban dynamited 1400-year-old Buddha statues, provoking horrified headlines.

Appalling, sure, but consider that a Taliban representative claimed that this was not really about religion, but politics. United Nations money was offered to protect the statues. Meanwhile, a tough winter and a drought were making life harder for the people of Afghanistan. Sanctions were making a bad situation worse. So, according to the Taliban rep, "In our religion, if anything is harmless, we just leave it. If money is going to statues while children are dying of malnutrition next door, then that makes it harmful, and we destroy it. What do you expect from a country when you just ostracize them and isolate them and send in cruise missiles and their children are dying?"

The Taliban are still a creepy, theocratic, oppressive government who destroyed irreplaceable art in a fit of political pique. They just happen to have a more complex point there than simple religious extremism. Ignoring the real world's intrusion into what some folks want to be a pure clash of cultures is not unlike the folks who swear still that Osama Bin Laden targeted the US for its freedom and nothing more. He may have had lists and videos saying otherwise, but no. Too hard to understand that a murderous, bad man might have been motivated by something besides religion.

So, it's not just ISIS, or the Taliban. Who or what else messes up art? Well, war does. And then it gets awkward for the west.

Certainly there's a particularly visceral outrage over seeing people purposefully trash museums and burn libraries. We see it, and we think of Nazis. And then we think of "Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people."

Unfortunately, plenty of people have been burned, and a whole lot of books, too, thanks to the US. It's always useful to ask what exactly the difference is between the brutally direct approach of ISIS, and the single extra step employed by the US and the west when the latter destroys and kills for a goal.

The US invasion of Iraq was a tragedy for humanitarian reasons first and foremost. But when you invade a country some predictable things follow. People die. Buildings are demolished. And sometimes priceless art is broken and looted. But the US troops didn't personally loot the Iraq National Museum, or burn the libraries. They wouldn't do that. Sure. They just dropped bomb after bomb on the country. (And in May 2003, when US troops vandalized Ur and stole artifacts, their superiors tried to prevent access to the ancient site, presumably because the good guys can't be trusted.) Most people when faced with an impending war will worry about their safety, and that of their loved ones. Art from the cradle of civilization is a secondary concern.

Curators in the National Museum worked to save what they could, but looters came anyway. And two years later, the British museum reported that US troops had carved a path of destruction through some of the area's most important cultural sites. Ancient, lovely Babylon was hosting a

US military site. Heavy vehicles destroyed 2600-year-old bricks. Soil full of artifacts was carelessly moved.

Fundamentally, war fucks things up. We know this, warmongers know this, though they swear that they'll perfect war next time. Still, the idea that the US can claim ignorance about the humanitarian and the cultural cost of their wars is infuriating. Yes, ISIS's murder videos are disturbing. Their destruction of art is appalling. The US does the exact same thing, but with infinitely more resources. Our country may be better to live under for more people than the Islamic State would be. Nobody sane wants ISIS to win any more ground. But here in the west we are never as enlightened as we believe, and we are never as far off from their barbarism as we assume.

We do it, too. We take lives, and our bombs eviscerate priceless objects. Unlike ISIS, we just have the decency not to be so hands on about it – not to gloat so much.