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Indiana Jones and the big lie

Here's what the franchise gets wrong about the hunt for lost treasures.



By Justin M. Jacobs December 11 at 6:00 AM

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In “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” the globe-trotting archaeologist Indiana Jones recovered a golden idol from the jungles of Peru, outran an oversized boulder and beat the Nazis to the Ark of the Covenant in Egypt. Though all these feats were conceived in the minds of Hollywood screenwriters, one of them is far less plausible than the others — and it isn’t the boulder, the Ark or the idol.

It is the year of their alleged happening: 1936. By this date, Egyptian, Peruvian, Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi and Chinese scholars were challenging the long-standing monopoly of European and American archaeologists over the recovery and display of art and antiquities. Faced with a firm yet principled ultimatum — collaborate with indigenous scholars or leave the country — most Western archaeologists, convinced that the natives were incapable of running their own affairs, packed their bags and left.

The popular Indiana Jones film franchise, currently under development for a fifth film to be released in 2020, perpetuates the ugly Western response to this scholarly challenge rather than exploring the challenge itself. Instead of acknowledging the fact that Egyptian and Chinese scholars had long since earned a legitimate place alongside their Western colleagues, most European and American archaeologists took refuge in a racist fantasy that recast the nature of their profession as one suitable only for white men.

If Hollywood really wants to live up to its avowed commitment to telling the inclusive stories demanded by a global audience, the fifth film should focus, finally, on the true history of Western archaeological expeditions: one in which white men were no longer the ones calling the shots.

Indy's signature phrase — “That belongs in a museum!” — is a stirring line of cinematic bombast intended to redeem the less savory aspects of his profession. Sure, he may steal golden idols from Peruvian tribes and sell them for a profit back home, but he isn't a hired hand in the pocket of the highest bidder. Instead, Jones turns the spoils of his adventures over to the National Museum in D.C., where the curator Marcus Brody puts them on public display.

In the movie, the museum may be part of the “good guy narrative.” In reality, it has been the stage on which the story of Western dominance in archaeology has played out. The “good guys” recover art and antiquities from neglect and place them in a public exhibit designed to educate the masses; the bad guys keep such treasures hidden away for their own selfish purposes. This is not just a Hollywood story line. For the past 200 years, museums have not only connected

archaeologists with the altruistic ideals of science, preservation and education, but also turned them into the good guys — and the “natives” into uncivilized tomb raiders.

The process has shaped the modern museum since it emerged during the Enlightenment. In 1793, the doors of the Louvre opened to the French masses for the first time. But as soon as the curtain was raised on this noble mission of public enlightenment, the armies of Napoleon perverted it for political ends, filling the Louvre with the art and antiquities taken from vanquished rivals from Brussels to Cairo.

Over the next hundred years, every other European empire would do the same. As did the rest of the world, which quickly grasped the awesome power of the modern museum to legitimate the unregulated movement of art and antiquities across cultural and political boundaries. “Until now, Europeans have used various means to take the antiquities of our country away,” the Ottoman minister of education, Münif Pasha, wrote in 1880, “and they did this because they did not see an inclination toward this in us.”

By the end of the 19th century, the Turks and Egyptians, hoping to put an end to the exodus of cultural treasures from their domains, had built their own national museums and passed their own antiquities preservation laws. Other vulnerable countries such as China followed suit.

Westerners responded with an ugly mix of racism and arrogance. In the 1870s, an American consul stationed near the fabled site of Troy advised Heinrich Schliemann, a German-American tycoon who had smuggled valuable treasures

out of the Ottoman Empire, that permitting “any part of them to go into the absurd collection of rubbish which the Turks call their ‘Museum,’” would be worse than throwing them away.

Fifty years later, Western arrogance finally met its match. In 1922, British archaeologist and Egyptologist Howard Carter attempted to remove artifacts from the tomb of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen. He was stopped by the Egyptians, who sent in soldiers to take control of the tomb. The “King Tut effect” reverberated throughout the Middle East, leading by 1936 to the termination or obstruction of Western excavations in Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

Not surprisingly, Western archaeologists were loath to acknowledge the new status quo. James Henry Breasted, an American Egyptologist, greeted the rise of formerly colonized rivals with open contempt, referring to the Iranians as the most “loathsome vermin anywhere on the surface of the earth.” In East Asia, the American paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews dismissed his Chinese detractors as “returned students who absorbed a superficial level of Western culture.”

By 1936, the age of Indiana Jones was over. Yet it could have been otherwise. Behind every ugly clash was an earnest proposal to pool resources and undertake joint excavations. Most Western archaeologists, however, refused to commit funds or personnel to any expedition that served primarily to enrich the less privileged party.

So what can the lessons of history teach Hollywood? First, the feel-good line of the Indiana Jones franchise conceals a far more contentious — and often racist — past than is alluded to in the films. In other words, when Harrison Ford delivers the

phrase, “That belongs in a museum!” what Dr. Jones really means is: “That belongs in *my* museum!”

Second, historical accuracy means better storytelling. The sort of archaeological free-for-all depicted in the Indiana Jones films is pure fiction. By 1936, the year that “Raiders of the Lost Ark” takes place, the King Tut effect had been reshaping archaeology for more than a decade. If Western archaeologists were doing any digging at all, they were doing it under Egyptian, Turkish, Peruvian or Chinese oversight. In some instances, they were doing it alongside non-Western colleagues.

Few details about the fifth Indiana Jones film are known, other than the return of Steven Spielberg as director and Harrison Ford as the lead actor. But if one thing is certain about the time frame in which it will be set, it is that it will take place during an era when white men no longer called the shots in any archaeological enterprise outside the Western world.

One would hope that Spielberg wishes to avoid the historical travesty of last summer’s “Dunkirk,” which inexcusably whitewashed the presence of British Indian troops on European battlefields during the Second World War. If so, he would do well to heed the lessons of history and cast Ford alongside an archaeological equal drawn from the non-Western world.

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