

A Perfect Bust

This scenario was adapted from *Cases in Business Ethics* by T. M. Garrett, R. D. Baumhart, T. V. Purcell, and P. Roets. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968)

Position One: Yes, of Course!

In a routine transaction, a New York art gallery acquired a twenty-six-inch stucco sculpture. In October 1965 the gallery offered it for sale at one of its regular auctions. The gallery's auctioneer started the bidding at \$150, which indicated that the gallery's appraisers, who regarded the sculpture as a reproduction, did not think it valuable.

Experts from the Metropolitan Museum of New York had seen the bust on display and, after a quiet investigation, had decided that it was an original work of either Andrea de Verrocchio or Leonardo Da Vinci. The Metropolitan sent a man to bid on the bust. He was able to purchase it for \$225. Some art appraisers estimate that the Metropolitan would have gone as high as \$225,000 to obtain the bust. One prominent art dealer put its value at \$500,000. The sculpture is now mounted in the Metropolitan for the public to enjoy free of charge.

Did the Metropolitan Museum act ethically?

They have no obligation to tell anyone what they found out. The Metropolitan's action was a free-market decision. They should, in fact, be admired for their skill in finding a hidden value that no one else had the skill to discover.

The art gallery should have done its homework about what they were selling. There was nothing preventing them from discovering the same information. There is no reason for them to be outraged. In fact, they probably purchased it from someone else even more cheaply.

Since the Metropolitan is a public institution, the work of art will benefit many people who otherwise would not get to see such a valuable piece of work.

Position Two: Of Course Not!

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Did the Metropolitan Museum act ethically?

The Metropolitan Museum had a moral obligation to tell the art gallery about the actual value of its possession. Not to do so was deceptive and immoral. If the marketplace is to be just, prices for items sold and purchased have to reflect their actual value based on everyone sharing the same information. If not, the system allows inequities at someone's expense.

The consequences of the Metropolitan's action will be extremely negative, since many people will be suspicious of the Metropolitan's motives. Every time the museum wants to purchase something in the future, the seller and the public will be suspicious and may try to charge more than necessary.