

Cambodia welcomes the Metropolitan Museum of Art's plan to return looted antiquities

By **Maysoon Khan and Sopheng Cheang**
The Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — Cambodia has welcomed the announcement that New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art will return more than a dozen pieces of ancient artwork to Cambodia and Thailand that were tied to an art dealer and collector accused of running a huge antiquities trafficking network out of Southeast Asia.

This most recent repatriation of artwork comes as many museums in the United States and Europe reckon with collections that contain objects looted from Asia, Africa, and other places during centuries of colonialism or in times of upheaval.

Fourteen Khmer sculptures will be returned to Cambodia and two will be returned to Thailand, the Manhattan museum announced in December, though no specific timeline was given.

"We appreciate this first step in the right direction," said a statement issued by Cambodia's Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. "We look forward to further returns and acknowledgements of the truth regarding our lost national treasures, taken from Cambodia in the time of war and genocide."

Cambodia suffered from war and the brutal rule of the communist Khmer Rouge in the 1970s and 1980s, causing disorder that opened the opportunity for its archaeological treasures to be looted.

The repatriation of the ancient pieces was linked to well-known art dealer Douglas Latchford, who was indicted in 2019 for allegedly orchestrating a multi-year scheme to sell looted Cambodian antiquities on the international art market. Latchford, who died the following



RELICS REPATRIATED. Cambodia has welcomed the announcement that New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art will return more than a dozen pieces of ancient artwork to Cambodia and Thailand that were tied to an art dealer and collector accused of running a huge antiquities trafficking network out of Southeast Asia. Pictured are "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Seated in Royal Ease" (late 10th to early 11th century sculpture), left, and "Standing Shiva" (bronze sculpture), right, pieces which are slated for return. (Metropolitan Museum of Art via AP)

year, had denied any involvement in smuggling.

The museum initially cooperated with the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan and the New York office of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) on the return of 13 sculptures tied to Latchford before determining there were three more that should be repatriated.

"As demonstrated with today's announcement, pieces linked to the investigation of Douglas Latchford continue to reveal themselves," HSI acting special agent in charge Erin Keegan said in a statement last month. "The Metropolitan Museum of Art has not only recognized the significance of these 13 Khmer artifacts, which were shamelessly stolen, but has also volunteered to return them, as part of their ongoing cooperation, to their rightful owners: the People of Cambodia."

This isn't the first time the museum has repatriated art linked to Latchford. In 2013, it returned two objects to Cambodia.

The Latchford family also had a load of centuries-old Cambodian jewelry in their possession that they later returned to Cambodia. In February, 77 pieces of jewelry made of gold and other precious metal pieces — including



items such as crowns, necklaces, and earrings — were returned to their homeland. Other stone and bronze artifacts were returned in September 2021.

Pieces being returned include a bronze sculpture called "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Seated in Royal Ease," made sometime between the late 10th century and early 11th century. Another piece of art, made of stone in the seventh century and named "Head of Buddha," will also be returned. Those pieces are part of 10 that can still be viewed in the museum's galleries while arrangements are made for their return.

"These returns contribute to the reconciliation and healing of the Cambodian people who went through decades of civil war and suffered tremendously from the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge genocide, and to a greater strengthening of our relationship with the United States," Cambodia's Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, Phoeurng Sackona, said in her agency's statement.

Research efforts were already underway by the museum to examine the ownership history of its objects, focusing on how ancient art and cultural property changed hands, as well as the provenance of Nazi-looted artwork.

Associated Press writer Maysoon Khan in Albany, New York, contributed to this report. Khan is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Thai police seize a record haul of methamphetamine tablets

BANGKOK (AP) — Thai police have seized what is being called a record haul of methamphetamine tablets in the western province of Kanchanaburi, close to the Myanmar border.

Officers found an estimated 50 million tablets hidden in sacks in a six-wheeler truck they stopped at a joint police-military checkpoint. The occupants of the truck — a man and a woman — were arrested.

The quantity of methamphetamine tablets seized is a record for Thailand, Jeremy Douglas, the Southeast Asia regional representative for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said. The region's biggest known seizure took place in neighboring Laos in October 2021, when a consignment of 55 million pills was discovered.

"We've not seen major cases here in Kanchanaburi for a couple of years, and never anything like this," Douglas said. "But it's also not a surprise given the extreme supply being produced by militias and traffickers in northern Myanmar."

Myanmar has historically been the region's main drug production area in part because of lax security measures in border areas where minority ethnic groups have long been fighting for greater autonomy. Some of the powerful ethnic armed groups there have been heavily involved in narcotics production for decades.

A 2021 military takeover in Myanmar that unseated the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi triggered armed resistance nationwide, further destabilizing the country.

The U.N. drug agency's June 2023 report on synthetic drugs in East and Southeast Asia warned that the huge trade in methamphetamine and other illegal drugs shows no signs of slowing down.

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, who is also interior minister, told reporters that illegal drugs used to be smuggled into Thailand's northern and northeastern provinces, but had moved to western provinces such as Kanchanaburi because of more intense surveillance and security along the old routes, a point the U.N. agency had also made.

Anutin said increased combat between Myanmar's military and its foes among the country's pro-democracy movement and ethnic minority armed groups also increased the smugglers' risks along their old routes.

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