

# Looted Artifacts, Returned to Yemen, Will Go to the Smithsonian, for Now

Under an agreement, ownership of 77 objects seized from a New York art dealer reverted to Yemen. They will be returned when the violent conflict there subsides.



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As the pressure on museums and collectors to return looted artifacts to their countries of origin has grown in recent years, one issue has been whether some countries are equipped to accept them immediately.

On Tuesday, under an agreement designed to recognize such a difficulty, the Smithsonian Institution announced that the U.S. is returning 77 looted artifacts to the government of the Republic of Yemen, but their physical return will be delayed during the current violent conflict there.

For the next two years at least, the objects will be housed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, where some may be put on display.

The artifacts include 65 funerary stelae, or carved stones, from northwest Yemen, dated to the second half of the first millennium B.C., a bronze bowl, and 11 folios from early Qurans.

They were seized from a New York art dealer more than a decade ago. Since then, they have been held in storage, and the new partnership, the first return of cultural objects by the U.S. government to Yemen in almost 20 years, means some could soon emerge from the darkness of storage and be exhibited.

"The current situation in Yemen is tragic," Chase F. Robinson, director of the museum of Asian Art, said in an interview. "This is just a small moment in which we can celebrate some collaboration."



An inscribed bronze bowl believed to date from the 3rd century A.D. Homeland Security Investigations New York

Yemen is trying to emerge from an eight-year civil conflict between the government, backed by Saudi Arabia, and a well-armed rebel group called the Houthis. The United Nations estimates that the war has claimed more than 200,000 lives, mostly from indirect causes like hunger and disease.

As well as creating a refugee and humanitarian crisis, the war has left much of the nation's infrastructure in ruins. According to the National Museum of Asian Art, the country "has experienced heavy looting and destruction of its tangible cultural heritage."

The objects were turned over to the custody of the National Museum of Asian Art on Tuesday afternoon during a ceremony at the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen in Washington, with officials from the U.S. departments of Homeland Security, State and Justice.

"With the current situation in Yemen, it is not the right time to bring the objects back into the country," Mohammed Al-Hadhrami, Yemen's ambassador to the United States, said in a statement.

According to the initial two-year custodial agreement, which Yemen can request to extend, the museum will store, document and care for the objects and will be able to "exhibit the collection to foster a greater understanding of ancient Yemeni art," the museum said in its announcement.

As museums have increasingly embraced the repatriation of objects stolen from other countries or acquired under disputed circumstances, the Smithsonian has sought to be a prominent voice in the debate about how and when objects should be returned.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian, has said he wants the institution's museums to update their collections practices, and last year adopted an ethical returns policy that holds that issues of fairness could trump any legal title to objects it might possess.

Following that announcement, it said that it would return 29 Benin Bronzes from its own collections to Nigeria, though nine remained on loan at the Smithsonian.

Because of the civil war in Yemen, and concerns about the looting it fostered, U.S. officials have been pushing urgently to seize any items from that country that are found to have entered the United States illegally.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has also entered into a loan agreement that returns ownership of artifacts to the country of origin but permits their continued display by the institution. In the case of the Met, it has an arrangement with the Greek government to exhibit one of the world's most significant privately assembled collections of Cycladic antiquities, with an acknowledgment that it belongs to the Greek state.

A page from a Quran believed to date from the 8th century A.D. Homeland Security Investigations New York

The Smithsonian's partnership with Yemen is the latest example of cooperation between an American museum and a country of origin. "This partnership with Yemen will serve as an exemplary model of how U.S. museums can work with other countries to steward and share cultural objects with broad audiences," the National Museum of Asian Art said.

Mr. Robinson said it ensures the present safeguarding of precious artifacts from Yemen's antiquity, but also means they will be returned when Yemen determines the objects will be safe.

He said a small number of the repatriated objects could join a current exhibition, "Ancient Yemen: Incense, Art, and Trade," where they could be used to tell the story of Yemen, the destruction of its cultural heritage, and the successful return of smuggled items.

According to court documents, the Yemeni objects were smuggled into the United States in 2008 and 2009 by Mousa Khouli of Brooklyn, also known as Morris Khouli, who sold ancient coins and artifacts from a now-defunct Manhattan gallery, Windsor Antiquities.

In 2012, Mr. Khouli pleaded guilty to smuggling and making false statements and was sentenced to a year of probation, six months' home confinement and 200 hours of community service. He also agreed to forfeit any claims to the seized objects.

Investigators said he shipped the 65 carved funerary stones, weighing about 1,000 pounds, via the United Arab Emirates, by labeling them as "decorative stone carved heads" from India and valuing them at \$75 apiece.

Investigators said he later tried to sell two of the stones as "limestone carvings" from Yemen and Saudi Arabia, one for \$700 and the other for \$2,000.