

A Looting Matter: Cambodia's Stolen Antiquities

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Cambodia has often featured in the Western imagination as a place of plunder and pilfering. Temples and artefacts of exquisite beauty have exercised the interest of adventurers and buccaneers who looted with almost kleptocratic tendency.

In 1924, the French novelist and future statesman **André Malraux**, proved himself one of Europe’s greatest adventurers in making off with a ton of sacred stones from Angkor Wat. It is [estimated](#) that 20 statues were taken. Malraux, along with his wife Clara and collaborator Louis Chevasson, were subsequently [apprehended](#) for their pinching efforts on the order of George Groslier, founding director of the National Museum of Cambodia. According to the culturally eclectic Groslier, Malraux deserved the title of *le petit voleur* (the little thief) for such brazen exploits.

The assortment of crises from the 1960s to the 1990s also did their fair share in creating conditions of instability. Where genocide, unrest and a collapse of social order unfolds, plunderers thrive. Archaeological sites offered rich pickings to looters, often [in collaboration](#) with local military authorities. The pilfered items would then be taken to the Cambodia-Thailand border and taken to Thai brokers.

With the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, things worsened further. Hundreds of temples were left vulnerable, rich prey to opportunistic authorities and rapacious individuals. Over the course of November and December 1998, the 12th-century temple of Banteay Chhmar [fell prey](#) to a raid that saw some 500 square feet of bas-relief hacked into pieces and transported. Antiquities expert Claude Jacques considered it “a case study for looting, every kind of looting, big and small.”

With such a record of extensive, relentless theft, any return of antiquities is bound to be seen as a squiggle upon paper – hardly an achievement. But the recent return from the United States of 30 looted items, including bronze and stone statues of Hindu and Buddhist deities, was a positive note in a field otherwise marked by disappointments. It is, at the very least, a modest addition to other repatriations that have begun to take place from various collections and auction houses.

The system of recovery and repatriation is never easy. Museums are often reluctant to part with goods obtained in questionable circumstances. The larger the museum's collections, the less innocent its administrators tend to be. Stolen artefacts pack and fill museums globally, and the trend is unlikely to change.

In the case of the 30 items of concern here, they had been procured by the object itchy **Douglas Latchford**, a Bangkok dealer also known as Pakpong Kriangsak and gifted in the art of forging documents to conceal the way the various samples had been obtained. Along the way, this Malraux-like incarnation, an "adventurer scholar", had also become an authority on Cambodian art, [co-writing](#) three books on Khmer antiquities with scholar Emma Bunker.

In 1951, he settled in Thailand and proceeded to concoct fabulous stories of innocent acquisition. In 2010, Latchford [gave](#) the *Bangkok Post* a taste of his storytelling, spinning a horrendous fib by claiming that "most of the pieces he has come across have been found and dug up by farmers in fields." The enterprising Latchford, for his deceptive labours, managed to acquire a collection of Khmer Empire antiquities so vast it constituted [the largest](#) outside Cambodia itself.

Along the way, [a number of trusts](#) were also set up in tax havens to further complicate problems of ownership. The establishment of the Jersey-domiciled trusts was a direct response to interest shown by US authorities in Latchford's empire of ill-gotten gains.

In fact, Latchford's activities had interested the US Department of Justice for some years, and was [charged](#) in 2019 with wire fraud conspiracy and various crimes related to the sale of looted Cambodian antiquities through creating false provenance documents and falsifying shipping documents and invoices. His death in 2020 terminated the proceedings against him.

On this occasion, a number of private collectors and various US museums succumbed to three civil forfeiture claims made by Manhattan-based federal prosecutor **Damian Williams** in the Southern District of New York. In November 2021, Williams, in filing a civil complaint against a museum in Denver, Colorado, [noted](#) how Latchford had "papered over the problematic provenance of Cambodian antiquities with falsehoods, in the process successfully placing stolen goods in the permanent collection of an American museum."

According to the [press release](#) from the US Department of Justice, the stolen items had been obtained by "an organized looting network" and duly sold by Latchford. They included "a 10th century sculpture of Skanda on a Peacock and a monumental 10th century sculpture of Ganesha, both looted from the ancient Khmer capital Koh Ker."

Williams, reflecting on the 30 returned artefacts, was basking in some glory. "Today, we celebrate the return of Cambodia's cultural heritage to the Cambodian people, and reaffirm our commitment to reducing the illicit trafficking of art and antiquities."

Ricky J. Patel, Acting Special-Agent-in-Charge of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), also [added his bit](#), noting that HIS New York's dedicated Cultural Property, Arts and Antiquities Unit had worked "alongside our government partners, hunted down leads, examined origin, reviewed financial records, and conducted dozens of interviews to find and recover these pieces we are returning today."

The HSI unit in question is [advertised](#) as an elite gathering of 10,400 employees comprising 6,800 special agents located in 225 cities across the United States and 86 overseas locations across 55 countries.

Such efforts deserve some lowkey cheer. Other culprits are getting off rather easily in this whole affair. The success of Latchford and his ilk must, in the end, be based on a degree of connivance and understanding from those who received his stolen goods. He had attained sufficient notoriety [as far back](#) as the early 1970s, when he began supplying a UK auction house with looted Khmer antiquities. Even amateurs mildly interested in Cambodian artefacts would have been familiar that anything coming out of the country should have been subjected to glares of suspicion.

Tess Davis, director of the Antiquities Coalition, is [blunt](#) about the implications of this. “If I were a museum curator, I would check every Cambodian piece acquired after 1965 just to be safe; that’s how prolific [Latchford] was.” New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art is one institution that [has admitted](#) to doing so, “reviewing the pieces that came [into its] collection via Latchford and his associates”.

Ironically, the relinquished antiquities will also be displayed in a museum – in this case, the National Museum of Cambodia, located in Phnom Penh. When they do feature, it will be worth noting where they were to begin with, unmolested in shrouded, jungled history, only to be tampered with by warriors in search of moneyed glory.

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