

Asian Civilisations Museum bought 30 works from disgraced gallery



Two items bought by the museum which may have been stolen are a gilded Virgin Mary and Christ altar (above), acquired by the museum in 2009 for US\$135,000, and a bronze figure of a Hindu goddess, bought in 2007 for US\$650,000. The goddess sculpture, it was reported last month, may have been looted from a temple in Tamil Nadu. -- PHOTOS: ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM



By Huang Lijie Arts Correspondent

The Asian Civilisations Museum has revealed that it bought 30 works of art from a disgraced New York gallery accused of trafficking in millions of dollars' worth of stolen artefacts.

The museum was alerted through ongoing court cases in the US that two items it had bought from Art of the Past for a total of US\$785,000 (S\$998,000) may have been stolen.

A gilded Virgin Mary and Christ altar from Goa, India, dating from around the late 18th century, was acquired by the museum in 2009 for US\$135,000.

The altar, which has not been exhibited here, allegedly had documents on its origins forged by the gallery, museum revealed yesterday.

It was reported last month that an 11th-century bronze sculpture of the Hindu goddess Uma Parameshvari, bought by the museum in 2007 for US\$650,000, may have been looted from a temple in Tamil Nadu and ill transported to the US. After it arrived here, it was displayed in the museum's 2007 exhibition, Beauty In Asia 200BCE To Today.

The museum said yesterday it had made "all possible checks" on the origins of the two artefacts and had been convinced at the point of purchase that they were "legally and ethically acquired".

checks at the time showed otherwise.

The museum said yesterday it had not received information that any of the other 28 items it bought from the gallery were stolen. It did not disclose the total sum it paid for its purchases.

Red flags were raised following legal action by New York's Manhattan district attorney against the gallery for selling stolen art to private collectors and museums around the world.

The gallery's Indian-born, United States-based dealer Subhash Kapoor, 65, is accused of smuggling more than US\$100 million in antiquities from India into the US. He is now in custody in India waiting trial (see other story).

His gallery manager, Aaron Freedman, 41, has pleaded guilty to trafficking in stolen art and helping Kapoor sell the loot.

In a statement yesterday, the museum said it had bought 30 objects from the New York gallery between 1997 and 2010.

The museum, run by the National Heritage Board (NHB), said the purchase of the Uma statue and altar had "followed its acquisition procedures strictly".

Typically, when a museum curator has identified an object as worthy of acquisition and in line with its focus and collection policy, a request to approve the purchase will be made to the museum director.

In cases involving items above a certain value - although the Asian Civilisations Museum did not specify the value - advice from experts in the field and members of the museum's advisory board, as well as approval from the NHB chief executive are required.

And, in some cases, the approval of NHB board members is also required.

Once approval is given, the curator will proceed with the purchase. This includes checking the origin of the object through documents provided by the dealer.

For now, the museum said it is closely monitoring court proceedings in the US and will cooperate fully with foreign authorities in any investigation.

Any stolen or looted objects among the artefacts purchased from Art of the Past will be returned in accordance with international laws and practice.

Already, the National Gallery of Australia, which made 21 purchases from Kapoor, has agreed to return a statue confirmed to be stolen from a Tamil Nadu temple.

The NHB is considering legal action and consulting lawyers on the possibility of recovering funds used to purchase the artefacts.

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Second time in spotlight for dealer

ART dealer Subhash Kapoor began his gallery Art of the Past in 1974.

The boutique, with a swish Upper East Side address in New York City, had a burnished record of closing deals with, and donating artefacts to, a list of prominent museums.

They included the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur Sackler Gallery in Washington, and the National Gallery of Australia.

Kapoor first made the news in Singapore when he went to court in 2010 to sue his former lover, Ms

artefacts as well as US\$15,000 in sales proceeds after their break-up.

Kapoor, who is divorced, met her in 1997 at an art show in San Francisco. They were together for about 10 years from 1998.

Ms Paramaspry countersued, claiming he was holding on to 28 art pieces belonging to her.

In the court decision, she was ordered to return the antiques and to bear his legal costs while he had to return one antique, for which she had proof of purchase.

In 2011, Kapoor was arrested in Germany and extradited to India, where he faces charges related to traffic in illicit antiquities.

The Manhattan district attorney's office has also issued a warrant for his arrest in the US on charges of possessing stolen property. He is expected to be extradited to the US for trial this year.