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India asks Australian gallery to return stolen Nataraja idol

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The sculpture acquired by the National Gallery of Australia from Subhash Kapoor in 2008.

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The Indian government has requested the National Gallery of Australia to return the 1,000-year-old Nataraja idol in its possession.

The Attorney-General's Department in Australia, in a statement released on Wednesday, said it received the letter and would take action in accordance with the Australian legal provisions. This significant development possibly marks the beginning of the return of the idol.

In its letter, the Indian government complained that the idol was exported in contravention of the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972, which, among other things, prohibits export of antiquities. It was only a few days ago that the Attorney-General, who is also the Minister for Arts, had criticised the NGA for its slack practices in purchasing the Nataraja bronze.

In a related development, the NGA on Wednesday removed the Nataraja idol from display. In an email reply to The Hindu, it confirmed that the museum voluntarily removed the idol from the gallery, but refused to explain the reasons.

In 2008, the NGA bought the bronze idol for US \$5 million from Subhash Kapoor, the U.S.-based antiquities dealer. The Tamil Nadu Police produced evidence to establish that the idol was stolen from a temple at Sripuranthan in Tamil Nadu. They had arrested Mr. Kapoor for his alleged involvement in the theft. He is now lodged in the Chennai prison and is facing trial.

The NGA had earlier said it had followed proper procedures before purchasing the idol. It had also claimed that the Nataraja in its possession and the one stolen from Tamil Nadu were not the same. It refused to return the idol and continued to display it.

Keywords: [National Gallery Australia](#), [stolen nataraja idol](#), [Subash Kapoor](#), [idol smuggling](#), [George Brandis](#), [Tamil Nadu idol theft cases](#), [stolen idols](#), [illicit trade](#), [antiquities theft](#), [Nataraja idols](#), [Australian laws](#)

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