

Published: October 8, 2013 22:19 IST | Updated: October 9, 2013 11:15 IST

Police confirm idol in Australian gallery was stolen from T.N. temple

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Photo: Nikki Short, The Australian.

Special Arrangement

Investigation on to unravel how the ancient idol reached Australia

Two months after *The Hindu* published a report that a [1000-year-old stone sculpture of Ardhanarisvara](#) from Virddhagiresvarar temple in Vriddhachalam, Tamil Nadu, had surfaced in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (NSW) in Sydney, the Tamil Nadu police have confirmed that this sculpture was stolen from the temple.

Investigation is on to find out how the idol reached the gallery. The police are enquiring into the role of Subhash Chandra Kapoor, a United States-based antiquities dealer arrested last year, in this murky trail.

The gallery, in reply to an email sent by this correspondent earlier, admitted that it failed to verify the provenance documentation that keeps track of successive ownership of the artefact, and cross check with the previous owner thoroughly before buying the sculpture from Kapoor in 2004. An NSW spokesperson said “the gallery will return the artefact should it be proven to be stolen.”

The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is already under investigation with regard to a Nataraja idol from Tamil Nadu that has been linked to Kapoor’s operations.

After his arrest, museums that had bought art objects from him came under scrutiny. While many remained tight-lipped about the provenance details of artefacts bought, the NSW, to its credit, shared the information.

The Hindu report

Through a collaborative effort with two journalists in the United States and Australia, and a blogger on art of South India based in Singapore, *The Hindu* reported that the sculpture was stolen from the Vriddhachalam temple. It also brought the missing of the idol to the notice of the temple authorities. The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board in Chennai referred this case to the Idol Wing of the Tamil Nadu police.

Sources in the police told *The Hindu* that officers conducted a preliminary investigation and found that in 2002, the temple officials removed the idol, which was placed in the outer wall of the sanctum, as it was partly damaged. The officials had put in place a poor replica, and it is in worship since then.

The damaged sculpture, considered by experts as one of the valuable works of Chola art, was apparently kept inside the temple. The police, after investigation, concluded that the idol was stolen, and booked a case under IPC Sections

380 and 457 (sub clause 2), which deal with idol theft and housebreaking in temple respectively. The sources said the case would be transferred to the Idol Wing based in Chennai for further enquiry.

Keywords: [idol theft](#), [Ardhanarisvara](#), [Virddhagireesvarar temple](#)

Printable version | Aug 21, 2014 10:41:00 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/police-confirm-idol-in-australian-gallery-was-stolen-from-tn-temple/article5214659.ece>

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