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THE IDOL THIEF

Inside one of the biggest antiquities-smuggling rings in history.

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

Early one morning in June, 2003, two dozen police officers drew their guns and prepared to raid a stately three-story brick-and-concrete home on a corner lot in Everest Colony, a quiet residential neighborhood on the outskirts of the Indian city of Jaipur. Several khaki-clad officers scaled the imposing stone wall surrounding the house, disarmed a guard, and opened the gate. Under the gaze of a security camera, the rest of the team filed silently onto the property. The raid was the culmination of a yearlong investigation and months of surveillance, during which officers had posed as vagrants and fruit peddlers. They had timed the strike for dawn, hoping to startle the inhabitants.

The officers called out, “Open the door!” and banged on the locked front entrance. They waited, but no one came. Then someone spotted smoke billowing from a third-floor window. The

On Vaman Ghiya’s properties, the police found paintings, sculptures, and a dismantled Mogul pavilion the size of a house.

GERALD SCARFE



superintendent of police, Anand Shrivastava, ordered his men to break down the door. They ran upstairs to the master bedroom, where they found the owner, Vaman Narayan Ghiya, standing in his pajamas, hurriedly throwing documents into an improvised fire on the floor.

“How dare you?” Ghiya shouted. “How could you enter my house?” He cursed at the officers who rushed to restrain him, struggling and shouting, “You cannot touch me!”

The police led Ghiya away, and gathered his wife, son, and two daughters, who had been awakened by the raid. Then Superintendent Shrivastava and his men searched the house, spending hours rummaging through the elegant rooms. Behind the wood panelling of Ghiya’s private study, the officers discovered a set of secret cupboards, which held hundreds of photographs of ancient Indian sculptures: graceful stone figures of the deities Vishnu, Shiva, and Parvati and Parvati’s elephant-headed son, Ganesha; Jain Tirthankaras and Chola bronzes; dancing goddesses with many arms and melon breasts, festooned with delicately rendered ornaments. The photographs were color snapshots, and the objects pictured sat outdoors, in patches of grass or mud. Many evidently had been roughly pried away from temple walls and were missing limbs or heads. The police also discovered sixty-eight glossy auction catalogues from Sotheby’s and Christie’s in London and New York.

This stash seemed to confirm Shrivastava's suspicion that Vaman Ghiya operated one of the most extensive and sophisticated clandestine antiquities rings in history, and that he had grown rich in the past three decades by smuggling thousands of Indian antiques to auction houses and private collectors in the West. The police found no sculptures in Ghiya's home. But, in the days that followed, Shrivastava's men raided half a dozen properties that Ghiya owned around Jaipur, his farm outside the city, and various godowns, or storage facilities, in Mathura and Delhi. They discovered antique paintings, swords and shields, marble panels, stone pillars, three hundred and forty-eight pieces of sculpture, and a dismantled Mogul pavilion the size of a small house.

Vaman Ghiya was an enigma in Jaipur's tight-knit art world. A handsome man with silvering hair, small, nervous eyes, and an aloof, imperious manner, he wore elegant suits and conducted business in Jaipur's nicest hotels. People who know him say that he spent much of the year travelling and maintained a single-minded focus on business. He distrusted even his closest associates. "He wouldn't make small talk. He just wanted to do the deal," one of his buyers told me. "He was totally opaque."

Ghiya's legitimate business was the Crafts Palace, a colossal handicrafts showroom on Jaipur's Amer Road. Jaipur is a prosperous city of nearly three million people, the capital of the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan. With its picturesque old quarter—known as the Pink City, for its grapefruit-

colored architecture—and elaborate Rajput palaces in the surrounding countryside, Jaipur has long been a major stop on the tourist route through India. It is the center of India's gemstone industry, and of a flourishing trade in handicrafts—small, mass-produced brass animals and other figurines that are sold to tourists and exported in bulk.

Ghiya's handicrafts business had many hallmarks of a front. India's Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, passed in 1972, is a particularly stringent measure, which requires that any privately owned work of art that is more than a hundred years old be registered with the government. Since it is generally illegal to export such objects, to be an antique dealer in India with an international clientele is also arguably to be a criminal. But Indian customs officers are required to check only ten per cent of any large shipment of exports, and smugglers frequently bury a single priceless statue in a giant case of bric-a-brac. Other Jaipur handicrafts dealers told the police that they knew nothing about Ghiya's buyers or suppliers. His ostensibly thriving enterprise seemed to have no connection to the local economy, and Ghiya spent very little time at the showroom; his son, who was in his twenties, ran the shop.

In the summer of 2002, posing undercover as antique buyers, Anand Shrivastava and his men had rounded up a gang of thirty-four temple thieves who were trying to sell looted Hindu idols on the black market. Although the statues had little artistic merit, and were not antiques, the thieves were demanding high prices. Shrivastava wondered whether some wealthy local buyer might be driving

up prices; when interrogated, the thieves all told him that it was Vaman Narayan Ghiya. “He is the king of this world,” they said.

Shrivastava, who is thirty-seven, has a sharp, vulpine nose and a neat mustache. “First, let me take out all the literature,” he said when I visited him last summer at his new post, in Bharatpur, a town several hours northeast of Jaipur. The Indian police force is punctiliously hierarchical, and Shrivastava carries himself with an air of impatient authority. When we traversed the fifty yards from his official residence to his office, he insisted that we do so in a government-issue sedan, driven by an unsmiling chauffeur. We sat at Shrivastava’s sprawling desk, in an office with two air-conditioners and four ceiling fans, and ate pomegranate seeds while a deputy unwrapped a series of large red blankets tied with string, revealing stacks of art-history books and monographs, photocopied articles and evidence reports, and dozens of auction catalogues.

“This is just a glimpse,” Shrivastava said with evident pride. “All of my photographs and literature filled two rooms.”

Officials at India’s Central Bureau of Investigation told Shrivastava that they had suspected for decades that Ghiya was one of India’s biggest antique thieves, but his operation was so sophisticated that they had never been able to gather sufficient evidence against him. “He’s become stronger and bigger than the law,” Shrivastava marvelled. It occurred to Shrivastava that Ghiya represented both an information vacuum for law enforcement and a

portal through which India was slowly losing its cultural heritage. Operation Black Hole began in June, 2002, with an initial team of twelve policemen. “I told my chaps, ‘Find out who that bugger is,’ ” Shrivastava said.

International antiquities smuggling is effectively a white-collar crime in India: it requires capital and education, and the participants use the wealth that the business generates to cultivate an image of social respectability. Worldwide, the looted-antiquities market could be as much as a multibillion-dollar industry, and in recent years several cases have revealed the role of smuggling in arts acquisition at the highest levels, causing a scandal in the art world. But the shadowy practices of the smugglers who supply the international market have rarely been detailed. When Ghiya was charged with multiple counts of possession of stolen property and trafficking in looted antiquities, and was thrown into Jaipur Central Jail—where he remains today, held without bail, and forbidden by the court to speak to anyone but his lawyers and his family—the story made national headlines. (Ghiya has pleaded not guilty and has instructed his lawyers not to speak with the press.) “People were shocked,” Chandramani Singh, a Jaipur archeologist who knew Ghiya’s father, told me. “But I think many of them knew he was doing such things.”

Stone temples devoted to the major Hindu deities have been the focus of theistic cults on the Indian subcontinent since the fifth century, and these shrines, often full of carved images of major and minor gods, can still be found

throughout the country, along with a profusion of Buddhist and Islamic antiquities. “There are too many things, too many sites,” Singh said. “It is easier for a Westerner, because they don’t have such an amount of history.” In a populous developing country like India, state and national authorities have few resources, Singh explained, and demand for clean drinking water, irrigation, roads, and other priorities means that archeological preservation remains underfunded. The Archaeological Survey of India has been unable to create a comprehensive national register of every temple and archeological site, much less protect them all from incursion.

In February, 1998, a gang of thieves visited a secluded site called Baroli, near the confluence of the Chambal and Bamini Rivers, in eastern Rajasthan. Set back from the road and surrounded by trees, the ornate stone shrines at Baroli were erected between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. There are nine temples in all, one of them rising majestically out of a small pond, along with numerous stone pillars and lingas, often regarded as the traditional phallic symbol of Shiva’s generative power. Hindu villagers still worship in the crumbling temples, but Baroli attracts few tourists, and there is little to deter enterprising scavengers.

For religious Hindus, images of the gods are not merely representational; they can be inhabited by the deity they depict. The faithful anoint the statues with oils, camphor, and sandalwood, garland them with flowers, and make offerings of food, incense, and music. (The word “idol,” though largely abandoned by Western academics because of its

perceived pejorative connotation, remains in use in India to describe these objects.) When, in 1986, the Indian government sued for the return of a twelfth-century bronze Shiva that had been looted from a village in Pathur, it did so on behalf of the offended god himself: Shiva was named as a plaintiff in the case. “In the south, people still don’t tell lies in Shiva’s temple,” Ashok Shekhar, a former state arts and culture official in Rajasthan, told me. “These are very hotheaded deities.”

Looting a temple, therefore, is a sacrilegious act—the province of an especially unscrupulous criminal element. In Baroli, the thieves approached one of the best-preserved of the temples, a fifty-eight-foot-tall beehive-shaped building devoted to Shiva and lined with dramatic sculptures: three-headed Brahmas, bejewelled Lakshmis, a dozen incarnations of Vishnu, and a parade of other deities and attendants. Along the sanctum’s western wall, a jaunty stone Shiva danced atop a lotus flower. Dating to the tenth century, the statue was adorned with a tasselled belt and anklets, and clutched a serpent in one of his many hands. Shiva is a supreme god, and in Hindu theology he assumes several different forms; the sensuous contortions of dancing Shivas make them popular among Western collectors. Using a jack, the thieves dislodged the statue from the niche it had occupied for a thousand years.

According to Shrivastava, the thieves sold the piece to Ghiya, who smuggled it out of India. When the local villagers discovered the theft, they were outraged. Ghiya quickly commissioned a replica of

the Shiva and ordered his men to deposit it by the side of the road near the local police station. The local authorities triumphantly announced its recovery. Fearing that the Shiva might be stolen again, they decided not to return it to the temple, and stored it in an Archaeological Survey facility in the nearby city of Chittorgarh.

Under interrogation, Ghiya admitted to the police that he had sent the original to England, where it ended up in the private collection of John Kasmin, a well-known figure in the London art world. After the magazine *India Today* ran a story following Ghiya's arrest which suggested that Kasmin now had the Shiva, Kasmin faxed Shrivastava, insisting that he had "legally and innocently" bought the statue in London, but also volunteering to return it to India without compensation. (Kasmin told me recently that he had bought the sculpture not from Ghiya but from a dealer in London.) After the local police at Baroli learned from Shrivastava that Kasmin was allegedly in possession of the real Shiva, a panel of archeologists was summoned to inspect the Shiva being held in Chittorgarh. The panel declared it a fake.

The Western market for Indian sculpture was slow to develop. During the colonial era, these objects were often considered mere curiosities. British visitors occasionally helped themselves: Lord Hastings tore out the marble bath in Shah Jahan's palace at Agra to send to George IV as a gift; George Curzon, the viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, recalled how nineteenth-century picnickers brought chisels to the Taj Mahal and

“whiled away the afternoon by chipping out fragments of agate . . . from the cenotaphs of the Emperor and his lamented Queen.” But, by the mid-twentieth century, influential American collectors like John D. Rockefeller III and the canned-food magnate Norton Simon were beginning to develop collections, and museums that had already established strong Chinese and Japanese holdings were looking to South Asia as well. Just as India outlawed the export of antiques, demand for them—and the prices they could fetch—soared. Some American museums, like the Cleveland Museum, slowed their rate of acquisition of Indian objects after 1972, but others, according to a Cambridge University study, assembled the bulk of their collections at a time when it was illegal for such objects to leave India.

“Everybody knew all of these lovely Indian sculptures don’t come from Malibu Beach or Indiana,” Thomas Hoving, who was the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967 to 1977, told me. “But people were willing to look the other way.” In 1973, Norton Simon bought a beautiful tenth-century bronze Nataraja, or dancing Shiva, from a dealer in New York for a million dollars. But the Indian government intervened, saying that the statue had been stolen from a village in Tamil Nadu and smuggled abroad. “Hell, yes, it was smuggled,” Simon told the *Times*. “I spent between \$15 and \$16 million in the last two years on Asian art, and most of it was smuggled.” It was during this period that Vaman Narayan Ghiya entered the business.

Ghiya was born into a lower-caste family in 1948, the year after independence and partition. His father, Badri Narayan, owned a small photography shop near Jaipur's City Palace, where he sold Kodak film and did studio portraits; he also framed pictures and occasionally sold paintings. After graduating from Maharaja College, Ghiya went into business selling antique Rajasthani paintings. He made frequent sales trips to Bombay, and opened his own shop in Jaipur. He married, and started a family.

Ariane Dandois, a Frenchwoman who first visited Ghiya's shop in the late seventies, was one of his earliest Western clients. Dandois is tall, blond, and glamorous, the mistress of Elie de Rothschild. She owned an Asian-art gallery on the Rue des Saints-Pères, in Paris. She had first travelled to India as a student at the Sorbonne, and she began spending several months a year in the country, scouting for material. Dandois recalls visiting Ghiya in a small house in which his entire family slept together in one room, on the floor. Ghiya was eager to cultivate Western clients, and he was extremely polite and deferential—"like a *serviteur*," Dandois said. His wife dutifully refilled Dandois's teacup every time she emptied it.

Many maharajas had begun selling off their extensive art collections, and Dandois negotiated with the Maharaja of Bikaner to purchase his entire collection of marble furniture for twenty-five thousand dollars. Ghiya summoned a convoy of trucks to transport all sixty-four pieces of furniture

back to Jaipur, and gathered nearly a hundred locals in a courtyard, armed with little bowls of water, to scrub the furniture. The job took a full year.

There were perhaps twenty Western dealers who visited Jaipur in those days—French, Italian, British, and American. They stayed at the Rambagh Palace Hotel, the sprawling former home of Jaipur's royal family, and they came to rely on a new generation of Indian dealers like Ghiya, who could spare Westerners the risk and the discomfort of venturing out of the major cities on their own. Chief among these new dealers, according to people who knew him, was a man named Baliram Sharma. Based in Delhi, Sharma was arrested on several occasions, but he was never jailed for long. He became so influential, one Indian antique dealer told me, that dealers throughout the country “worked under the blessing of Sharma.”

“Nowadays, somebody farts here in New York and they know about it thirty seconds later” in Rajasthan, one dealer who had bought from Sharma and Ghiya told me. But, in the nineteen-seventies, “no one knew what we were asking for the pieces they sold us.” Sharma and a few others “were supplying all of the Western trade,” the dealer continued, and Sharma in particular was becoming extraordinarily wealthy. The dealer recalled running into Sharma at the airport in Zurich, and joking, “What are you doing? Visiting your money?” (When I contacted Sharma, who is now retired, he replied, “I think some unfriendly man gave you my name and e-mail address. I was never in the antique business.”)

It was an indication of Ghiya's ambition that when he entered the business, in the seventies, he did so not with the blessing of Sharma but in direct competition with him. People who knew Ghiya say that although he lacked Sharma's well-trained eye, he made up for it by amassing a vast inventory. According to the police, he began targeting the same archeologically rich areas as Sharma, and poaching Sharma's suppliers by paying slightly more than he did.

"He was so ambitious I can't tell you," Jack Franses, a former Sotheby's employee who met Ghiya in Jaipur in the early eighties, said of him. Ghiya took him to a dusty warehouse filled with antique *dhurries* (a kind of woven rug) and looked on as he went through them. "I like the way you work," Ghiya said admiringly. He said that he could get anything for anyone. "If you want the Taj Mahal, I'll send it to you," he told Franses. "I'll take it down piece by piece."

Ghiya cultivated dozens of middlemen throughout India. Part of the durability of Ghiya's network, authorities say, was that any given link on the chain knew only the links on either side. What connected these discrete links, from the local thief to the London auction house, was photographs. When a statue was stolen from a temple or bought for some small amount from a local farmer, it was brought to a middleman, who photographed it. The photograph would then make its way, often through further intermediaries, to Ghiya. These photographs were sent to prospective buyers abroad, or taken by Ghiya on sales trips to London and New York.

“He’d come with a big stack of Polaroids and you’d go through it,” one Western buyer told me. “There was nothing selective about it. It was a ton of junk with some wonderful stuff mixed in.”

One evening in Jaipur, I met Abhay Singh, who was Ghiya’s driver from 1984 to 2000 and is now a major witness in the government’s case against him. Singh is lanky, with pitted cheeks and a schoolboy part in his hair, and he told me about driving Ghiya into the countryside to rendezvous with middlemen and inspect their wares. Ghiya was extremely cautious, even paranoid, Singh said. Even when he wasn’t engaged in a deal, he kept a close watch on the rearview mirror, fearing that their car was being followed. Having selected the pieces he wanted to buy, Ghiya would instruct the middlemen to pack the purchases in their cars and return with him to Jaipur. On the drive back, “he would carry two flags with him, one red and one green,” Singh explained. “If there was any danger, he would show the red flag to them, and they would stop and change their route.” In Jaipur, Ghiya stashed the objects at one of his godowns, or buried them at his farm, a secluded stretch of grassland dotted with gold and violet wildflowers, with several low-slung concrete buildings and a swimming pool. Ghiya often dug the holes for the sculptures himself. “He would tell the servants he was planting trees,” Singh said.

“He was too scared and too suspicious,” one Jaipur acquaintance told me. “He doesn’t get along with anybody in his life. Not even his wife.” When Ghiya wasn’t travelling, he came home late at night; he

invested his money in real estate; he had no hobbies; and everyone I spoke with agreed that his interest in the business was driven simply by the enormous sums of money to be made.

At times, his wariness bordered on superstition. “One day, I was frozen cold in Ghiya’s house in Jaipur,” Ariane Dandois recalled. “So I said, ‘Come on, Vaman, take your car, you drive me to Delhi. I’m going to sleep in a decent hotel room.’” Ghiya was nervous about bandits on the Jaipur-Delhi road, but he agreed to drive her. As the two walked out to the car, a bird appeared and swooped in a peculiar pattern around the house. “This is bad luck,” Ghiya announced, and said that he could not possibly undertake the journey. Dandois tried to reason with him, but he refused.

Ghiya’s caution deepened after he narrowly avoided smuggling charges, in 1989. Customs officers in Mumbai had discovered twenty-one antique objects during a random check of one of his handicrafts shipments. According to the police, and other antique dealers in Jaipur, when the authorities reexamined the container they concluded that the incriminating items were replicas, not actual antiques. That may have been true, or it may be that Ghiya had bribed the right official. But it is also possible that someone switched the real antiques for fakes. One common smuggler’s tactic in India is to prepare a copy of a looted antique and present it to the Archaeological Survey; once the survey grants a certificate of “non-antiquity,” the certificate accompanies the genuine antique out of the country.

At around this time, Baliram Sharma retired and, Shrivastava told me, Ghiya “started building an empire.” But, while most dealers and smugglers of Indian antiques insist on inspecting an object before paying for it, Ghiya stopped travelling to the countryside, making his initial selections by examining photographs. The objects were then routed to godowns in Mathura and Delhi, eliminating the transshipment point in Jaipur. Periodically, Ghiya inspected items before sending them abroad, but he increasingly depended on middlemen and photographs.

“He would never leave the photos around,” Abhay Singh told me. “The photos would come and he . . . would immediately mail those photographs to his buyers.”

In 1991, the British journalist Peter Watson was covering the art market for London’s *Observer* when he came into contact with a former Sotheby’s employee named James Hodges. Hodges had worked at the auction house for more than a decade, until 1989. Later, it was discovered that he had removed an ancient bronze helmet and a terracotta bowl from the premises. He was charged with theft, forgery, and false accounting, and was facing trial. Hodges told Watson that corruption and crime were pervasive at Sotheby’s. In the course of several years, he had assembled a dossier of papers, filling three suitcases, that he said documented a business environment in which smuggling and tax evasion were routine.

While Hodges was at Sotheby's, he said, a number of the auction house's biggest suppliers had prompted him to open fake bank accounts. These accounts operated as slush funds for a handful of dealers who consigned large amounts of unprovenanced antiquities. One of these dealers was Giacomo Medici, an Italian smuggler whose Geneva warehouse was raided by the authorities in 1997 and was found to contain several thousand archeological works. Medici, it turned out, was a prolific black marketer with extensive contacts in auction houses and museums. His subsequent trial in Italy implicated Marion True, the antiquities curator of the Getty, who is currently on trial in Rome. (Medici was convicted and is appealing the decision; True has pleaded not guilty.) Another beneficiary of the accounts, Hodges told Watson, was "a Mr. Ghiya of Jaipur."

Hodges explained that Ghiya was "a kind of Indian Medici," whose relationship with Sotheby's was so close that he would stop at Hodges's house in Shepherd's Bush on his way into London from the airport to drop off antiques he had carried on the plane. After establishing contact with the auction house, in the early nineteen-eighties, Ghiya flooded the antiquities department with items. Hodges showed Watson a 1986 department memo that said, "We now have a clear understanding of what should be sent [by Ghiya] and have ruled out the lower end of the market." Brendan Lynch, one of Sotheby's Indian-antiquities experts, had met with Ghiya, and the memo proposed that Lynch begin visiting Ghiya in Jaipur twice a year to acquire objects. "Any visit by a Sotheby's expert will be monitored in India and

justification for such a visit should be readily available,” the memo said. “It is unconvincing to say every expert is there on holiday and even the pretext of ‘writing a book’ is wearing pretty thin!” In another memo, Felicity Nicholson, who was then the director of antiquities at Sotheby’s, professed to find “the shady side of the antiquities market not uncongenial.”

Some of these memos were produced by Hodges’s defense team when his trial commenced at London’s Knightsbridge Crown Court, in November, 1991. Hodges, who was ultimately convicted of theft and false accounting, testified that the fraudulent bank accounts were considered an “extra service” for clients like Ghiya, and that he kept cash from the accounts in a special cupboard in Sotheby’s offices, because “one couldn’t keep on popping down to the bank.” Brendan Lynch, who had become Ghiya’s closest contact at Sotheby’s, fared especially poorly on the stand. When he was asked about his trips to India, he insisted that his purpose was not to acquire objects but merely to conduct “research and . . . valuations.” But the defense produced an expense report from a 1988 trip, in which Lynch had written, under “Purpose of Visit,” “To obtain property for the June 13 Indian sale.” When Lynch was asked whether he had ever hidden in the closet at Vaman Ghiya’s Jaipur home, he replied that he had not, but he conceded that on one occasion, when the police visited Ghiya, he did hide in the other room.

The trial was followed closely in the British press, but, even after Lynch's testimony, the auction house did not terminate its relationship with Ghiya. Watson's book, "Sotheby's: The Inside Story," was published in 1997, and had a more pronounced effect. Brendan Lynch left the company, and Sotheby's announced that it was closing its London antiquities department. "It has always been Sotheby's policy to be sensitive to issues of patrimony and heritage," a spokesman said at the time. He added that Sotheby's would continue to auction antiquities, but solely through New York.

When Shrivastava began his investigation, he knew nothing of Watson's book. In the first phase of Operation Black Hole, he dispatched officers around the country to pose as buyers. "The operation would be successful if I could catch hold of one branch at a time," Shrivastava told me. "The actual thief, then the transporter, then the first middleman, then the second, main middleman, then the packer who does the packaging in Delhi, then the exporter, then Ghiya." As it happened, Ghiya had a tendency to turn on business partners and subordinates, and to terminate relationships on the slightest suspicion. ("He had no friends," I was told on more than one occasion in Jaipur.) The caution and distrust that had enabled Vaman Ghiya to remain at large for so long had also produced a considerable number of disgruntled ex-employees. Before long, Shrivastava had located several who were willing to talk.

The testimony of these local thieves and middlemen was compelling, but inadequate as evidence. In some cases, the disappearance of idols had been registered with local police departments, but Shrivastava needed photographs of the pieces in the village temples from which they had been taken. Since the records of the Archaeological Survey and various state archeological authorities are woefully incomplete, Shrivastava began scouring libraries and archives in search of old photographs and archeological records. (Around this time, he also received a copy of Watson's book.) He sought out Ph.D. dissertations from the nineteen-sixties, many of which contained photographs of sculptures in their original temple settings. He concedes that his work became an obsession. "In my department, people said, 'You have gone mad! You are the man of archeology and art and culture.' And I was reading all the time and doing this bloody job," he said, chuckling. "This was my favorite hobby."

Occasionally, Shrivastava's research produced vivid illustrations of what was lost when a religious relic was smuggled out of India. He stumbled across a series of beautiful Matrika, or mother goddess, statues from outside Tanesar, a village near Udaipur. Originally, there were a dozen of the statues, each about two feet tall, carved from dark-green schist, and dating to the fifth century. They depicted graceful, broad-hipped women, each in a different stage of motherhood: one pregnant, one breast-feeding an infant, one cradling a toddler, one walking a child. An Indian archeological journal had published photographs of the Tanesar Matrikas in 1961. Sometime thereafter they were stolen and

smuggled out of the country. In the late nineties, one of the statues appeared in a Sotheby's catalogue, and in February, 2003, Shrivastava assembled some photographs of the sculptures and travelled to Tanesar.

When the police contingent arrived at the village, a crowd formed. Shrivastava's men asked whether anyone remembered a series of statues of women that had once stood nearby. "We got hold of a person who was now eighty years old," Shrivastava told me. "Long white hair. Old guy." Shrivastava asked the man if he remembered the Matrikas, and after a moment the man said, "Oh, yes, I recall, seven or eight idols were there of a lady, a lady feeding her child." Shrivastava took out the pictures of the Matrikas. The old man stared at them for a moment. Then he began to weep.

I asked what had become of the Matrikas, and Shrivastava told me that they had ended up in various museums in England and the United States. Today, one is at the British Museum, one is at the Cleveland Museum, and one is at the Met.

Vaman Ghiya's interrogation lasted ninety days. Initially, he was forced to share a cell with one of his middlemen, which he considered demeaning. He complained about the uncomfortable quarters and insisted on telephoning his doctor every day to discuss a number of ailments. Shrivastava was eager to carry out the interrogation, but Ghiya would break his silence only to say, "Why don't you tell me the name of your foreign bank account? I will send the money."

Shrivastava subjected Ghiya to long nights of questioning that began at 6 P.M. and continued until the morning. He describes his relationship with Ghiya during these sessions as somewhat jocular. “Obviously, he was doing illegal things. But it was art,” he told me. “It was not a bank robbery, he was not Al Qaeda. He is a good conversationalist. But, at the same time, he’s very hard, very hard.” After several days, Shrivastava tried taunting Ghiya, saying that it was his impression that Baliram Sharma was Ghiya’s superior in the antiquities trade. “He has been arrested by the police several times,” Ghiya replied. “This is the first time I have.” And when Shrivastava asked why the auction world continued doing business with Ghiya after Watson’s book and the dismissal of Brendan Lynch, Ghiya snapped back that he was indispensable. “They can survive without Brendan Lynch,” he said. “But not without me.”

Two weeks into the questioning, Ghiya began to open up. His confession, from which Shrivastava read aloud to me, was recorded by hand in Hindi in a series of lined blue notebooks, and describes a staggeringly sophisticated operation. Because of the free-trade zone and lax inspections in Switzerland, Ghiya shipped items through Geneva, where he maintained three shell corporations. These companies would buy and sell the objects among themselves, to launder the provenance, before forwarding them to auction houses and collectors elsewhere. The auction houses could claim to be accepting antiquities not from India but from a Swiss company that had bought them from another

Swiss company—even if the companies shared the same business address and the antiques had been on Swiss soil for less than a week.

James Hodges had shown Peter Watson documents with the letterhead of two Swiss companies used by Ghiya, Cape Lion Logging and Megavena.

Between 1984 and 1986, these two companies alone had consigned some ninety-three lots to Sotheby's sales. Sotheby's often paid his commission through a dummy bank account, Ghiya explained. To get cash back into India, Ghiya used *hawala*, a paperless money-remittance system that is widely used in India and by diasporic South Asian communities throughout the world, and is virtually untraceable.

After Sotheby's closed its London antiquities desk, in 1997, it simply shifted the business to New York, Ghiya told the police. A regal Jain Tirthankara that the police say Ghiya's men stole from Krishna Vilas, an Archaeological Survey-protected site in Rajasthan, turned up as Lot 135 in Sotheby's September, 2000, catalogue, with an estimated price of twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand dollars. (A Sotheby's spokeswoman told me that the auction house has “not knowingly sold any items” consigned by Ghiya since 1997, and has “the most rigorous due diligence program in the art market.” She also said that Lot 135 was consigned by a New York dealer who to her knowledge has no connection to Ghiya.) Christie's also continued to auction material that he stole, Ghiya said. The police had recovered a photograph in Ghiya's secret cupboard depicting a scuffed sandstone Shiva, crowned with an elaborate headdress, his hips thrust

to the right and his four arms radiating around him. It perfectly matched the elegantly lit Shiva that Christie's auctioned in New York on September 20, 2000—down to the jagged right edge of the panel, where it had been pried from its original location. Ghiya said that he had met with representatives from Christie's as late as January, 2003. A Christie's spokeswoman told me that "Christie's does not comment on the identities of their clients." She added that the lot in question was consigned not by Ghiya but "by a reputable dealer," whose name she would not divulge, and maintained that Christie's "had no reason to believe that Mr. Ghiya had any connection" to the Shiva.

Ghiya eventually supplied Shrivastava with the names of dozens of his buyers in Britain, Switzerland, and the United States. He had an uncanny memory for the street addresses and collecting preferences of various prominent individuals with whom he had done business, and for the fate of many objects that had passed through his hands. Collectors often suggest that they are the custodians and preservers of antiquities that might otherwise suffer from neglect or mistreatment, but Ghiya described the callous mechanics that are sometimes required to smuggle a statue from one country to another. He recalled a squat stone Vahara—a depiction of Vishnu in his incarnation as a boar—that stood in the village of Attru, in southeast Rajasthan. The boar weighed more than a thousand pounds and its legs and torso were covered in a magnificent phalanx of tiny, intricately carved figurines. Ghiya's thieves stole the statue in the late nineteen-eighties, lacing a chain through the boar's

open mouth and yanking it from its stone pedestal, shearing off its lower jaw and breaking its legs in the process. The piece was eventually sold to a private collector in Zurich.

Ghiya was charged with “habitually” receiving stolen property and with the illegal possession and export of antiquities. Indian courts operate at a sluggish pace, and the trial, which has been under way for more than a year, is expected to continue for at least another year. Journalists are barred from the courtroom, but Abhay Singh said that during the several days that he testified against his former employer Ghiya was alert and engaged, following every word. Despite his detailed confession, Ghiya pleaded not guilty. Torture and coercive interrogation are such a common feature of the Indian criminal-justice system that confessions given to police officers are not admissible in court. When I asked Shrivastava and another officer who was involved in the interrogations whether Ghiya had been tortured, they both dismissed any suggestion of cruel treatment as the timeworn refrain of criminal defendants everywhere. But Ghiya’s supporters, and others who have followed the case, maintain that it would be more unusual if the police had *not* physically coerced Ghiya’s confession than if they had.

“What Vaman did was he created a sort of aura,” a Rajasthan textiles dealer told me. Ghiya awakened Indians to the value of their cultural heritage, the

dealer explained, by demonstrating the prices that outsiders were willing to pay for it. “He made the market something fantastic.”

We were drinking milky tea in the cramped back room of a small shop in Jaipur’s old quarter, along with four other men. The men were jumpy. They peered suspiciously at several drivers lounging on their auto-rickshaws under a tree in front of the shop, and asked if I had been followed; they repeatedly insisted that I not use any of their names. Sandipan Sharma, an Indian journalist, had warned me that in the Jaipur art world antique dealing is “like doping in athletics”—everyone dabbles in it, and everyone denies doing so. Sure enough, none of the men would say that they dealt antiques. One told me that his main business was jewelry; another insisted that he was a goldsmith. “After this case, everybody says, ‘I sell only handicrafts,’ ” one man joked. The others laughed nervously.

The antiquities law has many critics. “The law as it stands doesn’t benefit anybody,” said the scholar and curator Pratapaditya Pal, who came to the United States in the mid-nineteen-sixties and built several renowned collections, including Norton Simon’s. The law is self-defeating, Pal believes, because it makes no distinction between a masterpiece and any generic antique. The result is a black market that the government lacks the resources to control. Pal prefers the model adopted by Japan, which identifies art works of national significance and keeps them in the country, while allowing everything else to be sold on the open market. The difference between what Walter Benjamin called “cult value” and

“exhibition value” makes the issue particularly vexed in India. Indians who are involved in the art world frequently express frustration that their countrymen have little interest in the purely artistic value of religious art. “We may be very advanced in the Internet and outsourcing and all that,” Pal said. “But I see absolutely no response to antiquities of any kind among any of the people I meet [in India], and I meet only the educated, upper crust.”

It is not clear what will become of the thousands of art works that the police say Ghiya smuggled out of the country between the nineteen-seventies and his capture. A dispute between the Archaeological Survey and the state government in Rajasthan over who would underwrite the cost of returning the art seems to have stalled the prospect of recovery. Even if works are returned, it is not clear where precisely they would go. Pal pointed out that, even after the Indian government spent enormous sums to secure the return of Norton Simon’s bronze Nataraja in the seventies, the sculpture—which is considered one of the masterpieces of Indian art—was neither restored to the temple from which it had been stolen nor displayed in a museum.

The police ultimately unearthed some nine hundred antiques in Ghiya’s various godowns around India, and trucked them back to Jaipur. Today, they inhabit a storage space at Jaipur’s Vidhyadhar Nagar police station. Officials have announced a plan to assemble all the recovered treasures into a permanent exhibit—a sort of Ghiya Collection of South Asian Art—which would be displayed at Hawa Mahal, Jaipur’s beautiful, tapering Palace of

Winds, in the heart of the Pink City. I visited Hawa Mahal, the façade of which is a lacy scrim of pink sandstone, perforated with hundreds of tiny windows through which nineteenth-century noblewomen could watch street festivals without being seen. There I met Zafar Ullah Khan, who has been assigned to curate the exhibit. Each sculpture had been photographed before being placed in storage, and, as we flipped through huge stacks of these black-and-white pictures, Khan told me that one day all of the sculptures would be on display. But, for the time being, they must stay in storage. The Palace of Winds needs a burglar alarm and closed-circuit security cameras. They couldn't possibly display so precious a trove of antiquities in so unguarded a space.

One enduring mystery is why a man of Ghiya's means has been unable to bribe his way out of prison. Ariane Dandois heard rumors in Jaipur that Ghiya had powerful enemies. "He had become very rich, very arrogant, and had problems with highly important people," she said. "You know, it's a mafia. Clearly, some people wanted him out of the market."

But the authorities may simply be sending a message. "When Ghiya was put behind bars, there was a lot of terror," Shrivastava told me late one night, as we sat on the deserted terrace of a sumptuous palace that had been reinvented as a posh hotel. The walls were hung with fading photographs of early-twentieth-century shooting parties: stern-faced maharajas and visiting British aristocrats standing triumphant over a mountain of

slain ducks; a Rolls-Royce with a dead tiger splayed along its running board, and the caption “Silver Shadow and Tiger.”

Ghiya’s operation was the largest antiquities smuggling racket in India’s history to be systematically dismantled and prosecuted, and, depending on the outcome of the trial, Ghiya could spend the rest of his life in jail. Shrivastava said that for three years after Ghiya’s arrest other smugglers left the business and the outflow of antiquities had been stemmed. “But now I have come to know that again they have started,” he told me. Bats made lazy figure eights in the air around us, splashing off the surface of the swimming pool. On a low rooftop in the distance, hotel employees spread out blankets and prepared to sleep beneath the stars. “This is a very specialized kind of crime. You have to have a lot of taste. You have to read a lot,” Shrivastava said. “These new guys, they have taken all the lessons from Ghiya. They are taking more precautions.” ♦



Patrick Radden Keefe has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2012.
