

Decades-old legal battle over golden Buddha statue comes to Manhattan

By [Priscilla DeGregory](#)

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A Filipino locksmith discovered the legendary loot of a Japanese World War II general — including a 3-foot-tall golden Buddha — only to be robbed by his country's dictator, launching a decades-long legal tussle.

Now, the battle has come to Manhattan.

The estate of treasure hunter Rogelio "Roger" Roxas is suing Imelda Marcos, the widow of infamous former Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, for more than \$25 million in Manhattan Supreme Court — the latest development in an international drama spanning nearly 50 years, according to court papers filed last week.

The saga began in 1971 when Roxas, a locksmith, was scouring a World War II-era tunnel network in his native Philippines and found Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita's glimmering trove — a stash later valued at \$22 billion that outshone even the wildest rumors of its opulence.

In addition to the 1-ton gold statue of Buddha, the treasure included beer-case-sized boxes of other gold and oodles of uncut diamonds, all plundered by Japanese troops during the war.

Yamashita could never reclaim it: He was convicted of war crimes and hanged by the Americans in 1946.

But Roxas's triumph at his discovery was short-lived. He claimed to have been captured, tortured and robbed of the treasure by then-dictator Marcos.

Over the next decades, the "Indiana Jones"-worthy tale became more of a courtroom drama, with Roxas filing a suit against Marcos and his wife in 1988 in Hawaii over the theft.

The suit outlived both Ferdinand, who died in 1989, and Roxas, who passed away in 1993.

But in 1996, a jury ruled that the late Roxas' company, the Golden Budha [sic] Corporation, was entitled to \$22 billion from the Philippines' former first family.

Then the ruling was overturned — not because there was doubt that the Marcos regime stole Roxas' fortune, but rather over the treasure's valuation. A retrial over the valuation is still being litigated in Hawaii, so Roxas' kin have yet to see any of that dough.

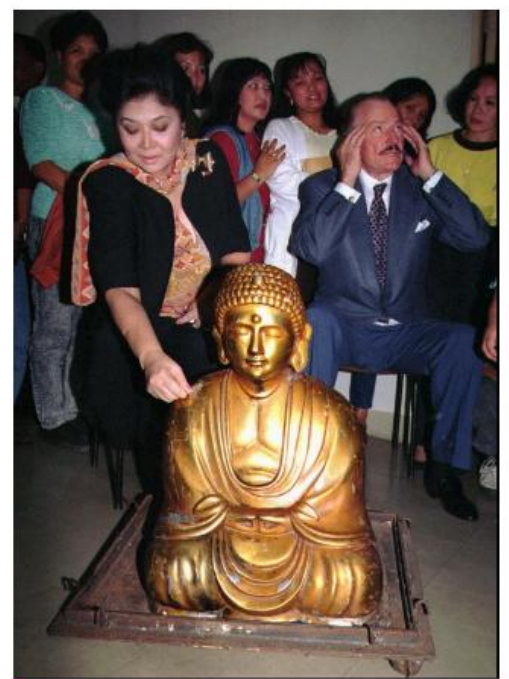
Still, Imelda Marcos was rapped with a pair of court judgments in favor of Roxas' family for over \$26 million — because she lied about her access to her late husband's estate.

Yet Imelda, now 90, has only coughed up about \$1.4 million of the sum, leading Roxas' daughter, Jeana, to file yet another suit, this time in Manhattan Supreme Court, seeking the balance, filings show.

The suit landed in Manhattan because Imelda — renowned for her collection of more than 1,000 pairs of designer shoes — has money stashed in the Big Apple, the filing claims.

Imelda Marcos could not be reached for comment.

Additional reporting by Aaron Feis, with Wires



Imelda Marcos with the statue in 1996.

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