

WINEWS

Tracking the smugglers' trail of priceless Islamic State loot to art markets in the West

By Anne Barker

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PHOTO: FBI investigators allege this mosaic of Hercules was stolen from Syria and smuggled to the US via Turkey. (Supplied)

Authorities in the United States and Europe are uncovering growing evidence that priceless antiquities looted by Islamic State (IS) terrorists — including works from war-torn Syria — are being smuggled into Western art markets.

In recent weeks investigators in the US, Spain and Italy have made arrests, or moved to seize antiquities believed to have been plundered from historical sites in Syria, Libya and Egypt.

But some travel via third countries, such as Turkey, or sit in storage for years until it is easier to smuggle them into the West.

FBI and Homeland Security Investigations last month lodged court documents accusing a Syrian-American man of smuggling an ancient mosaic of Hercules into the US with falsified documents.

Herculean-sized mosaic smuggled

The US Attorney's Office in California alleges the mosaic — weighing nearly a ton and measuring 5.5 x 2.5 metres, dates as far back as the third century and was likely stolen from Syria and smuggled to the US via Turkey.

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Key points:

- In recent weeks investigators in the US, Spain and Italy have begun cracking down on antiques looters
- The priceless artefacts have been plundered from historical sites in Syria, Libya and Egypt
- Some travel via third countries such as Turkey, or sit in storage until it is easier to smuggle to art markets in the West

It alleges Mohamad Yassin Alcharihi had illegally concealed the mosaic in his garage in California.

Court documents state that the FBI had been investigating Alcharihi since 2015 over his suspected involvement in smuggling "looted items from a foreign conflict area to the US".

They cite one expert who advises that since 2012, there has been an increase in illegal excavations in Syria involving cultural property, and that looted Syrian archaeological items are routinely routed through Turkey.

After the mosaic was seized, an expert retained by the government concluded that the artwork "was an authentic mosaic from the Byzantine Period depicting Roman mythology, and was consistent with the iconography of mosaics found in Syria, in particular in and around the city of Idlib, Syria," the US Attorney's Office in the Central District of California said.

"The complaint alleges that the mosaic was imported into the United States with paperwork indicating that it was part of a shipment of vases and mosaics worth only about \$2,200, but Mr Alcharihi later admitted paying \$12,000 for the items.

"Preliminary estimated values for the mosaic at issue in this case are much higher, according to the complaint."

It is understood Mr Alcharihi has not been charged, and denies he imported the mosaic illegally.

Arrests uncover tampering 'to remove traces of origin'

In March, Spanish police arrested a renowned antiquities dealer in Barcelona, Jaume Bagot Peix, who is accused of years-long involvement in a smuggling ring that trafficked antiquities looted from Libya to finance the Islamic State group.

Mr Bagot and his business partner Oriol Carreras Palomar face charges relating to financing terrorism, document forgery, belonging to a criminal organisation and contraband.

Police alleged the pair were part of a network based in Catalonia that sourced, restored and resold archaeological works from sites that were controlled by jihadists linked to IS.

Spanish police raided properties in or near Barcelona, and seized works including mosaics, sarcophagi and other works from ancient Greco-Roman sites in the Cyrenaic region in northern Libya, historical areas around Tripoli and neighbouring Egypt.



PHOTO: Spanish police with seized artefacts relating to Jaume Bagot. (Supplied)

Some showed signs of tampering to remove soil or other traces of their origins and to avoid the attention of authorities, the authorities said.

Spain's Interior Ministry says it is the first police operation of its kind targeting the financing of terrorism from works of art plundered by terrorist groups.

The Spanish arrests came after a long-running investigation involving the support of authorities in France, Italy, Belgium and Libya, and an apparent tip-off from a French historian Morgan Belzic, who became suspicious about several items Mr Bagot had offered for sale at an antiques fair in Brussels.

Mr Bagot told Spanish media he acquired the works through legitimate means, and had never bought any from Libyan, Syrian or Iraqi dealers.

He produced one receipt that he said showed he had bought a fourth century Greek marble head of a sculpture from Bonhams auction house in the UK.

Mr Bagot is considered an expert in ancient art and has even spoken at academic forums on the destruction of the Middle East's historical heritage by IS.

His own website claims that his Barcelona business is committed to "strictly complying with the laws of protection of national, foreign and UNESCO heritage.

"We also carry out exhaustive research into the provenance and previous ownership of the pieces. To this end we make use of the database of stolen objects."

The Interior Ministry said this made it "difficult for him to ignore the fact that the illicit trafficking of cultural property from territories under the control of terrorist groups constitutes one of its main means of financing".

To the Italian job on Egypt

Italian authorities too have seized thousands of suspected looted artefacts this year, including Egyptian archaeological items that may have been smuggled by IS militants or sympathisers.



PHOTO: Stolen Egyptian artefact seized in Europe. (Supplied: Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities)

Media reports say one such cache of 23,700 artefacts discovered in Italy in March included 118 ancient Egyptian items enclosed in a diplomatic container.

The Italian newspaper La Stampa in 2016 reported links between IS members or sympathisers and mafia groups including the 'Ndrangheta who "exchange them with weapons [Kalashnikov and anti-tank rocket propelled grenades]".

"The weapons come from Moldova and Ukraine through the Russian mafia. Brokers and sellers belong to the families of the 'Ndrangheta of Lamezia. And the Camorra. Transportation is assured by Chinese crime with their countless ships and containers," the newspaper report said.

Brothers sell at Sotheby's, relics returned to Yemen

Last year the Wall Street Journal reported that authorities in the US, France and Belgium were also investigating a New York gallery run by Lebanese-Canadian brothers Ali and Hicham Aboutaam over separate allegations of IS looting.

Neither brother has been charged, both vigorously deny the allegations, and Hicham Aboutaam is suing the Wall Street Journal for defamation.

Although US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents have previously accused both brothers of trafficking in illegally obtained art and antiquities, after they had put up for auction at Sotheby's a piece known as the south Arabian Alabaster Stele.

The US agents later obtained proof that the artefact was stolen, seized it and returned it to Yemen.

Hicham Aboutaam pleaded guilty in 2004 to forging a customs document over the origins of a silver drinking vessel from Iran that the gallery later sold for \$US950,000.

Tip of the funding iceberg

Jason Felch, an expert on the illicit antiquities trade who has written a book on the subject, says the recent arrests and seizures of artefacts in the US and Europe are undoubtedly just the tip of the iceberg.

"Based on the scale of the looting that we can see through satellite imagery of Syria during the civil war, and Iraq, there is a huge volume of material that has been removed illegally from war zones and smuggled out of the country," he said.



PHOTO: The UN reviewed satellite imagery that indicates small but visible looting holes at Saint Simeon's Basilica. (UNITAR/UNOSAT 2014)

The United Nations used satellite-based damage assessment to Cultural Heritage Sites in Syria to provide a detailed perspective into the extent of damage to culturally significant heritage sites in Syria.

The 2014 report combined expert assessment of imagery analysts and the background information from archaeological experts on Syrian heritage sites.



BEFORE: Shrine to Uwais al-Qarani and Ammar Bin Yasser in 2011 (UNITAR/UNOSAT 2014)

AFTER: Satellite-based damage assessment imagery from 2014 (UNITAR/UNOSAT 2014)

"We don't know exactly how large the iceberg is, it's an illicit trade and there is some extreme secrecy in the market that prevents us from knowing the true scope," the report said.

"We know from past conflicts that oftentimes what happens is that these looted objects sit in storage for a number of years until the conflict cools down and people's concerns about objects from that region cool down.

"And it's only then after they've been cleaned, they've had some false paperwork created to cover their origins.

"But they re-emerge on the market and we start seeing them sold."

Mr Felch says the arrests of Jaume Bagot and Oriol Carreras Palomar in Spain are significant because they appear to be the first time where anti-trafficking authorities have concrete evidence of antiquities looted by IS finding their way into Western markets.

He says it is doubtful antiquities trafficking is the primary source of funding for IS and other Islamist groups, but they would not be involved if it did not bring in some meaningful income.

And particularly worrying he says is that stolen antiquities are appearing in the West sooner and in bigger quantities than before.

After the Iraq wars in the 1990s and early 2000s it was about a decade before historical artefacts including cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals and the like emerged on world markets.

But since IS established its now defeated caliphate in Syria and Iraq, stolen works are appearing within half that time.

Mr Felch says like all transnational crime, antiquities looting requires a collaborative, international response.

"You've seen Western governments in particular get far more serious about investigating these antiquities trafficking networks, which have existed for many decades, but are now being focused on by law enforcement because of the potential for terrorism financing," he said.



PHOTO: The Dancing Shiva was on display at the National Gallery of Australia. (ABC News)

"The way these investigations typically happen is, at some point in the supply chain between Syria or Iraq and these Western art markets, law enforcement will pick up on a shipment of this material. Usually it's falsely labelled. Oftentimes it's some kind of modern form of art that does not trigger the inspections from customs officials.

"And oftentimes law enforcement will allow the shipment to go through to see who it's going to and where it's ending up."

Mr Felch also runs the website Chasing Aphrodite, which actively searches for looted antiquities in the world's museums, including Australia's.

Mr Felch was one of several investigative reporters who in 2014 helped to expose the poor due diligence conducted by major galleries including the National Gallery of Australia, over its procedures for verifying the provenance and authenticity of artefacts and archaeological works they source from overseas.

The NGA has since overhauled its due diligence procedures, and has returned several items including the Dancing Shiva, a bronze statue allegedly looted from a temple in India.

... and to Australia

The Art Gallery of NSW also returned an ancient statue known as Ardhanarishvara to India in 2014.

Jason Felch says despite the improvement in due diligence at Australian museums and galleries, there is still a danger that looted antiquities from Syria or Iraq could make their way to Australia.

"Most galleries today know better than to do business directly with people in the regions of interests where they know they'll get in trouble for buying stuff from," he said.

"So the market in most cases goes through a series of middle men and their purpose is really to launder these looted objects to create a document trail that makes it look like they came from somewhere else.

"Oftentimes they fabricate records that show that they've been in old collections stashed away in different safe corners of the world, as opposed to coming hot out of the ground in Syria and Iraq, which is where many of them are coming from.

"Australian museums and private collectors are aggressively building art collections much as they are here in the United States and in Europe. And supply follows demands.

"What we've seen in the past is that where there is a hunger to acquire these relics of the past, oftentimes objects from these war zones or conflict zones and these looted objects will move towards those demands to build these collections."

Topics: archaeology, art-history, law-crime-and-justice, united-states, spain, syrian-arab-republic, libyan-arab-jamahiriya, egypt

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PHOTO: Ardhanarishvara was returned to India in 2014. (Supplied: Art Gallery of NSW)