

Cleveland Museum of Art to Return a Rare Ancient Icon to Libya

A 2,200-year-old sculpture of a bearded man carved from basalt, unearthed in the 1930s, is believed to have been stolen in the early 1940s.



By Tom Mashberg

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While excavating an ancient Greek palace in eastern Libya in the 1930s, an archaeologist dug up a large earthen storage jar, looked inside and spotted something unexpected — a 2,200-year-old sculpture of a bearded man carved from basalt, a dark volcanic stone.

The two-foot-tall antiquity, most likely chiseled during ancient Egypt's Ptolemaic Dynasty, was a rare find. Known as a striding male figure, it is one of only 33 statues like it known to exist, Egyptologists say.

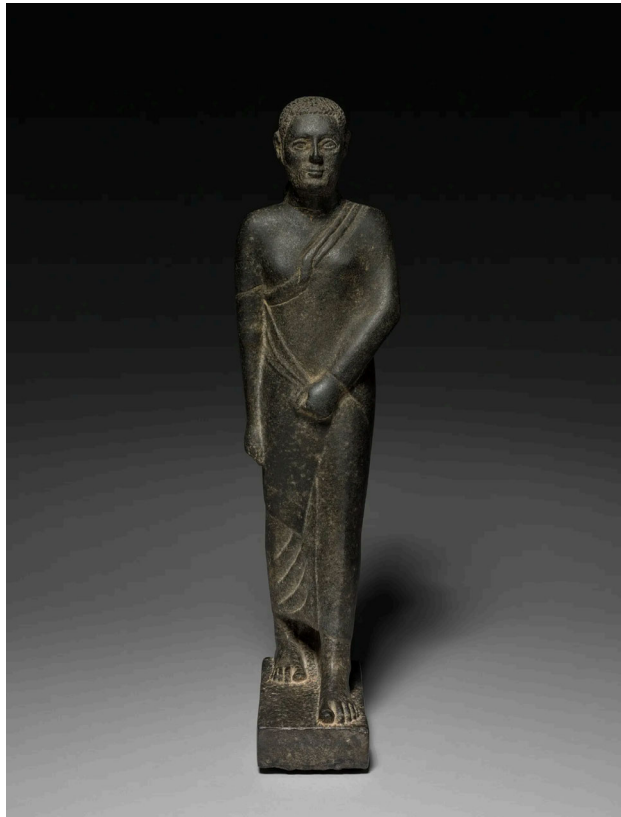
But it wasn't long before thieves got ahold of the bearded figure and took it on an illicit odyssey that brought it, in 1991, to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

On Wednesday, after curators had reviewed abundant proof that the item was stolen from Libya, including photos of it on display in the 1940s at a small museum near its discovery site, the museum agreed to transfer ownership to Libyan officials. In turn, Libya is allowing the museum to keep it on loan.

"When confronting a situation like this we look at all the material and try to come to an agreement that is beneficial to all parties," said Seth Pevnick, curator of Greek and Roman art at the Cleveland museum.

"It's less about ownership and more about access" to the object, he said, adding that the museum is hoping to display it on loan for five more years.

In a statement, the head of the Libyan Department of Antiquities, Mohamed Faraj Mohamed, said, "We look forward to continued cooperation with the Museum."



The two-foot-tall statue, chiseled during ancient Egypt's Ptolemaic Dynasty, was a rare find. It was discovered in the 1930s in a large earthenware storage jar. via The Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland museum's decision mirrors recent moves by some institutions to cede ownership of select items rather than contest claims that they were looted. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in April handed back two major sculptures to Thailand, while announcing "a shared commitment to collaborate on exchanges of art, expertise, and the display and study of Thai art."

But experts like Katie Paul of the Athar Project, which investigates global antiquities trafficking, said too few museums are showing a willingness to return items on their own initiative, and too many do not act until they are pressured by law enforcement.

"Returning something that is proven to be stolen is of course appropriate," she said, "but they still need to be more proactive in investigating their own provenance records."

"So museums are taking a small step in the right direction," Paul added. "But there are a lot more steps to go before we see true responsibility and accountability."

As for the striding male, his journey most likely began between 200 and 100 B.C., when he was carved as an icon during a long era of Greco-Roman rule over Egypt.

He remained in the region until just before World War II, when his storage jar was found. Pevnick said he might have been "put there for safekeeping."

The sculpture was placed in the nearby Ptolemais Museum, only to be stolen in the early 1940s when the region became a war zone between the Italians and the British. The statue reappeared in Switzerland in the early 1960s, researchers say, and was ultimately acquired by the art dealer Lawrence A. Fleischman.

Fleischman donated him to the Cleveland museum in 1991 on its 75th anniversary. He will remain there in a display case until Libyan officials retrieve him.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Ownership of a Striding Stone Figure Returns to Libya