

An Investigation Focuses on Antiquities Dealer

By Edward Wyatt

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CERRITOS, Calif. Robert Olson hardly looks like the head of a smuggling ring specializing in Asian antiquities.

On Wednesday morning, barefoot, dressed in a white T-shirt and stained, fraying black slacks, with receding white hair and a gap where his lower front teeth should be, Mr. Olson, 79, still appeared stunned that a dozen federal agents showed up early one morning a week ago to search his apartment here in this suburb southeast of Los Angeles.

The agents took files, photographs and reference books from the apartment and more than 2,000 bronze and terra-cotta artifacts, mostly imported from Thailand, Vietnam and other South Asian countries, from two storage lockers rented by Mr. Olson, an antiquities dealer.

Other agents searched the homes of his middle-age son and daughter, four Southern California museums, two Los Angeles-area art galleries and a Chicago-area private art collection as part of a five-year undercover investigation into the illegal importation and sale of antiquities. According to affidavits and search warrants filed in federal court in Los Angeles this month, much of the activity appeared to be centered on Mr. Olson and his clients. The agencies involved are the United States Attorneys Office, the National Park Service, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Internal Revenue Service.

In an interview in his apartment, Mr. Olson said he knew that some of the people in Thailand from whom he bought antiquities might have been breaking that country's laws with their procurement practices, but, "I would never, ever do anything illegal." Over 30 years and more than 100 trips to Thailand, he said, "I was told and told and told that everything I was doing was legal."

Federal authorities paint a different picture. They allege that Mr. Olson spent years traveling to archaeological sites in Thailand, where he sometimes watched as artifacts were illegally dug up. He then had the artifacts disguised as replicas and shipped to the United States in more than three dozen shipments.

Federal agents declined to comment, saying the investigation was continuing. The court papers describe Mr. Olson as selling items to an undercover agent, guiding the agent to an appraiser who valued the artifacts at four times their sales price and then arranging for the agent to donate the items to museums, producing fraudulent tax deductions.

"I didn't do that," Mr. Olson said on Wednesday, sitting in a recliner that was covered with a green beach towel in the living room of his cluttered, small apartment, redolent of the cats kept by his 11-year-old daughter, strewn with children's videotapes and full of tennis trophies.

Mr. Olson, who said he did not want himself photographed because of the lasting effects of a stroke he suffered in July, said he has been buying and selling antiquities for more than 30 years.

In the 1960s, while traveling throughout the western United States selling filters for truck engines, Mr. Olson said, he would often stop at curio shops to examine turquoise jewelry. After rejecting a job transfer to Chicago in the early 1970s, he began dealing in turquoise, buying it from miners in Arizona and selling it to dealers and to American Indians throughout the West.

Once, he said, a collector of American Indian artifacts told Mr. Olson that he had found many of the objects he owned. Mr. Olson said he persuaded the man, whom he would not name, to take him to a site where such artifacts could be found.

Together, he said, they discovered a large ceramic jar and a ladle, both more than 1,000 years old.

According to federal documents, those finds were made on protected federal land. “I didn’t know that then,” Mr. Olson said. “It was a great big expanse of empty land.” That was the only time he found pieces, he said. The remainder of his collection of more than 70 American Indian ladles was bought in stores, he said.

His entry into the Asian antiquities business was accidental. He said that he had been invited to a wedding in Thailand and in a shop there he saw a bronze bracelet that the owner told him was roughly 2,000 years old.

“I went to put it on and it broke, so I had to buy it,” he said. “And that got me started collecting artifacts.”

Soon he was importing Asian antiquities, selling many of them to Armand Labbé, a curator at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, Calif., and to Barry L. MacLean, a Chicago businessman and collector. Much of that business ended, Mr. Olson said, after Mr. Labbé died in 2005 and Mr. MacLean hired a curator who cut back on such purchases. More recently, Mr. Olson’s elder daughter sold some of his Thai artifacts on eBay, he said.

Now, agents have seized Mr. Olson’s entire collection, including \$40,000 worth of artifacts that he bought in the last six months. “I have no money,” he said. “My business is just nothing now.”