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US returns more than 500 looted a

Most from Ban Chiang Bronze Age village

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The United States yesterday officially handed over more than 500 looted antiquities, mostly from the Ban Chiang archaeological site, to Thailand after they were illegally looted decades ago.

The handover ceremony took place at the National Museum That Road in western Bangkok.



Ban Chiang artefacts are displayed at the Bangkok National Museum as Patrick Murphy, the US chargé d'affaires to Thailand, right, officially hands over the items to Thailand yesterday. They are among more than 500 artefacts smuggled to the US decades ago. Patipat Janthong

The event was attended by representatives from the Culture Ministry, the Thai Foreign Ministry and the US embassy who jointly signed a declaration to acknowledge the handover before displaying the items.

Culture Minister Veera Rojjojanarat said that Thais should value the artifacts. He expressed his gratitude to all relevant agencies and to the Foreign Ministry in particular.

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The US embassy's charge d'affaires Patrick Murphy said the return of looted artefacts was an international crime and finding a way to return them should be a priority.

"Over the past seven years, nearly 7,000 cultural artefacts have been returned to 30 countries around the world including South Korea. It is a very good news that today Thailand joins those countries. Cultural artefacts never should have left the kingdom," Mr Murphy said.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Sek Wannamethee explained the return process, which started in mid-2009 after the US government requested the Royal Thai Consulate in Los Angeles about the items and Thai experts inspect them at the Bowers Museum. The US reportedly found the items in 2008.

In September 2009, the Fine Arts Department team and a US cultural representative travelled to the US and the process of inspection and negotiations continued, Mr Sek said.

According to the initial inspection, 60-70% of the artefacts were from the prehistoric Ban Chiang settlement, while the remainder were believed to come from other sites in northeastern and central Thailand.

The world heritage site, Ban Chiang, was a Bronze Age village and cemetery, dating back 5,000 years.

The 554 archaeological artefacts were 222 pieces of pottery, 100 ornaments, 79 bronze tools, 35 beaded items, 11 stones and 10 sandstone moulds.

The handover resulted from the US attorney-general's investigation of smuggled artefacts in more than 100 private institutions in Illinois.

The operations were conducted following an increase in donations after the value of the donations became tax-deductible in the US.

Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California was among the institutions suspected to have received looted items from the US.

All artefacts have been returned to the country since the handover, but time was needed for the Fine Arts Department to complete the verification process.

The handover has been met with positive feedback from residents from Nong Han district of Udon Thani province

Sawetchat Banthaotuk, who is mayor of tambon Ban Chiang people are delighted to have the items back.

However, they said they wanted the ancient artefacts to be placed at Ban Chiang's archaeological site.

"We are happy to have the artefacts back, but it would be better if the returned items could be displayed in Ban Chiang as well as have the space to house them," he said.

Meanwhile, 334 ancient horseshoes were discovered inside Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park of Prachuap Khiri Khan province yesterday.

All the artefacts will be examined by archaeologists to see if they are from the prehistoric period.

In Ubon Ratchathani province, four ancient jars containing human skeletons were found underground in Na Tan district.

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