

LOCAL NEWS

**Bowers Museum faces
aftermath of federal raid over
artifacts**



UNHAPPY: Bowers Museum President Peter Keller walks through the halls of the museum with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent Shawn Gibson, during a serving of a search warrant.



By **RICHARD CHANG** | Orange County Register

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Thursday's raid of the Bowers Museum by federal agents shines a spotlight on the Santa Ana institution, its collecting practices and what might happen with dozens of artifacts in its collection that are alleged to have been smuggled illegally from Thailand and protected American Indian lands.

The federal action also puts the spotlight on museum president Peter C. Keller, who has been head of the city-owned facility since April 1991. He is not new to controversy. He has been active in steering the museum in new directions that have involved significant growth, on the one hand, and, on the

Under Keller's tenure, the museum has gone through two major expansions. The first, completed in 1992, added 50,000 square feet. The last one added a 30,000-square-foot north wing and was completed in February 2007. The budget has increased from \$3.54 million in 1996 to about \$8 million for 2007-08.

The museum also has shifted from being an academic, research and cultural center with in-house curators to a showcase for big, blockbuster exhibitions from abroad organized by outside consultants. Since the death of chief curator Armand Labbé in April 2005, the museum has not hired a single curator.

"We have curatorial consultants now," Keller said. "We hire international experts on the subject. We call them as we need them. It's a lot more effective and a lot more prestigious."

However, most major museums employ full-time curators who serve an important role in deciding what's appropriate for the museum to collect and exhibit, and what's not.

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There are other advantages to having well-educated and informed experts on staff who have connections with area communities. Curatorial oversight might have prevented situations that on Thursday led to federal investigators knocking on the museum's door.

“By working in the academic and cultural communities, museums can develop cooperations so (those groups) can lend objects that can be of great value to the culture,” said Paul Apodaca, associate professor of American studies at Chapman University and a former curator at the Bowers.

“(Museums) can work with established cultures, and things can be taken care of legally and ethically. When you work that way, you build a community around the museum.”

Over the years, some members of Orange County’s Latino community have argued that the Bowers Museum has ignored their cultures and has focused too much on mummies, Egypt and Chinese shows. Santa Ana, which owns the building and the land and contributes \$2.02 million annually to the museum, is 77.5 percent Hispanic, according to the 2006 U.S. Census’ American Community Survey.

The museum has altered its mission statement over the years. In 2000 it read: “The Bowers Museum of Cultural Art promotes education and understanding by bringing the world’s great cultural art to people of all ages.”

On Tuesday – two days before federal agents swarmed the museum and closed it down for a day – the statement was edited again. It now reads: “The Bowers Museum enriches lives through the world’s finest arts and cultures.”

PAST QUESTIONS

During the late 1990s, questions swirled around Keller’s own collecting and selling practices.

A 1999 Register investigation revealed that the museum director had used the museum’s gift shop seller’s permit to buy personal items at wholesale cost while purchasing inventory for the store. Keller also arranged for the Bowers to pay for shipping costs of his personal purchases.

Such practices violate the code of ethics established by the American Association of Museums, a national membership organization to which the Bowers belongs. As a result, the museum rewrote its ethics policies in 1999.

But on Thursday, Keller said he has continued to purchase objects for his personal collection and donate some of them to the museum, with a tax write-off. He says he has donated several African objects and has been to Africa 25 times.

This past week's affidavit against the Bowers articulated a number of instances in which an undercover agent purchased illegally obtained items from Robert Olson, a Cerritos man described in the document as a "smuggler" who supplied several regional museums with questionable artifacts. The documents say the undercover agent donated some of those objects to the Bowers for higher-value tax write-offs. Doing so violates federal tax laws, according to court papers.

It is unclear whether the items donated by Keller to the Bowers generated an overvalued tax write-off. He declined Friday to discuss the issue.

American Association of Museums ethics guidelines state: "Where conflicts of interest — actual, potential, or perceived — arise, the duty of loyalty to the museum and its mission must always be honored. Thus, a museum's governing authority and staff must ensure that no individual benefits at the expense of the museum's mission, reputation, or the community it serves."

THE PRESIDENT AND HIS SUPPORTERS

On Friday, Keller wrote a letter to the museum's Board of Governors explaining that he was not involved in the acquisition of Ban Chiang materials – objects excavated in northeastern Thailand dating back to 1000 B.C. to 200 A.D. Those artifacts are central to the federal investigation, and, though not removed from the museum, have become government property since Thursday, Bowers spokeswoman Heidi Simonian said.

Keller's letter also said he was not involved in the acquisition of one American Indian object, a ladle, which is described in the affidavit. Keller's letter did not mention 72 other American Indian ladles donated and sold illegally to the museum according to the affidavit.

Keller's letter also said he met Olson, the alleged smuggler, once, with the late Labbé, at Olson's storage facility in April 1991. Keller added that he had no reason to believe that Olson's Thai antiquities had been acquired illegally, and he has had no dealings with Olson since that visit.

In an interview last week, Keller said he was assured by Labbé that the Bai Chiang items had been obtained legally – a topic that the two "argued about," according to the affidavit.

Keller noted in his letter that he implemented an acquisitions process that's in full accordance with the AAM. He also said that the museum has stopped taking donations since Labbé's death, except for tribal Chinese and Oceanic art, because of planned future exhibits of items from those areas. Loaned Ban Chiang material has been returned to lenders, he said.

Frank J. De Santis, former chairman of the museum's acquisitions committee who left the board last June, said he doesn't think Keller has done anything wrong.

"We were very conscious of our responsibilities and we coordinated with Peter Keller as well," De Santis said Friday. "The museum had consultants who reviewed everything. We didn't have a lot of money so we were very strict about what we purchased and how much we paid for it."

Businessman Donald Kennedy, chairman of the Board of Governors, also voiced support of Keller. He said in the future, the Bowers will not "concentrate so much on Chinese stuff," and will feature a Mexican exhibit in 2009. Still, a large Terra Cotta Warriors exhibit from China is scheduled to open in May.

Kennedy, founder of Santa Ana-based First American Financial Corp., said the lack of a curator did not detract from visitors' experience at the Bowers. Admission is \$19 for adults on weekends, one of the highest ticket prices on the West Coast.

"We have a permanent exhibit but you just can't do (homegrown, touring shows) in the present situation. That's the way museums used to work, but you just can't do that anymore. You're in the cultural business, but you also have to entertain the people. And to do that, you have to get the best things that you can."

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