



WORLD & NATION

Federal probe of stolen art goes national

By Jason Felch and Mike Boehm

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

A federal investigation into looted Asian antiquities at Southland museums has broadened to include a prominent Chicago industrialist and art collector who purchased hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of allegedly stolen artifacts from a Cerritos arts dealer.

On Thursday, the same day federal agents raided four Southern California museums suspected of displaying stolen art, authorities also searched the private museum of Barry MacLean, a trustee of the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago. The newly revealed allegations have significantly raised the stakes of the ongoing investigation, suggesting that a suspected network of illegal art dealers extended far beyond Southern California and included objects far more valuable than those previously revealed.

The affidavit suggests that MacLean built his well-known art collection with substantial help from Robert Olson, an alleged smuggler of illicitly excavated Thai, Asian and Native American artifacts. Warrants authorized federal agents to seize Cambodian daggers and a sword, a bronze mask, many objects from Thailand's Ban Chiang culture and all records relating to MacLean's dealings with Olson.

The supporting evidence for the raid was collected by an undercover National Park Service agent who, while visiting MacLean's collection, shot photographs of certain objects.

In a phone interview Monday, Olson confirmed that MacLean was his biggest client, saying the Chicago collector purchased as much as \$50,000 to \$100,000 in Asian antiquities a year during the eight to 10 years they did business.

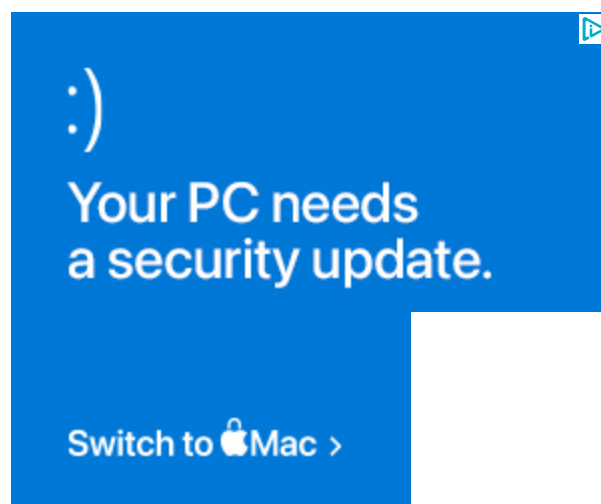
Olson said the objects he sold MacLean were recently excavated in Thailand and other Asian countries but denied that he or MacLean did anything illegal in buying them in the United States.


“I think everything he bought was legal,” said Olson, 79, of Cerritos. “The people I got it from weren’t doing the digging, they were buying from the diggers.”

Federal authorities, however, say the transactions appeared to violate federal laws related to the import and trafficking of looted art. The affidavits cite instances of falsified import records and possible violations of the National Stolen Property Act, under which objects illegally removed from foreign countries can be treated as stolen property under U.S. law if certain conditions are met.

The affidavit does not identify MacLean or Olson by name, but refers to “Individual A” buying objects from “Individual B.” The address of the private museum on the search warrant is identified in public records as a 5-acre lot owned by MacLean. Olson and two other sources confirmed that MacLean is the man involved in the allegations.

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The advertisement is a blue rectangular box with a white play button icon in the top right corner. It features a large white smiley face emoticon (:)) on the left. To the right of the emoticon, the text reads "Your PC needs a security update." in white. At the bottom of the box, it says "Switch to  Mac >" in white.

MacLean's museum and a private warehouse, both outside Chicago, were the only locations outside of California searched, authorities said.

MacLean did not respond to several requests for comment left at his office, his home and with his employees. He is chief executive of MacLean-Fogg, an \$800-million-a-year multinational company that sells components to the automotive and utilities industries and is based in Mundelein, Illinois.

Olson said he first heard about MacLean while in Thailand, where the businessman was described as a collector of early Ban Chiang pottery.

"I had a lot of it at the time," Olson recalled. "I called him and we started doing business. This was maybe eight to 10 years ago."

Olson described MacLean as "a wonderful nice guy. He just loves Asian art. He was buying all over the world. He loved Chinese bowls, ceramics from all over Thailand."

The most expensive objects that Olson recalled MacLean buying were six Chinese bronze vessels. After Olson put him in contact with the Thai dealer offering the pieces, MacLean paid the dealer \$100,000 directly, Olson said. He would not identify the dealer.

The prized pieces of MacLean's collection are currently in the midst of a national museum tour. "Passion for Form: Selections of Southeast Asian Art from the MacLean Collection" contains 53 of his best objects from Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia dating from 2200 BC to AD 1200.

It was exhibited recently at the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and was scheduled to go on display at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum on Feb. 9. When contacted Monday about the allegations, the Dartmouth museum said it had consulted with MacLean and canceled the exhibit.

The revelations about MacLean's collection are likely to raise new questions about museums' willingness to exhibit private antiquities collections.

"We did not vet every piece in the show," said Stephen Little, director of the Honolulu museum and the former curator of Asian art at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he first met MacLean.

"We have since made a conscious decision not to show private collections anymore," Little said.

MacLean had not donated, sold or lent any of the objects in his collection to the Art Institute of Chicago, said spokeswoman Carrie Heinonen.

Meanwhile, there was continued fallout from last week's raids, which targeted four Southern California museums: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, the Mingei International Museum in San Diego and the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana.

Experts in the field of museum ethics raised questions about the donation practices of Peter Keller, the president of the Bowers Museum, who told the Orange County Register that he had donated works from his own collection of African artifacts to the museum and taken tax write-offs.

Millicent Gaudieri, executive director of the Assn. of Art Museum Directors, said that if Keller used his position for personal gain, it would violate codes of ethics published by both the art museum directors' group and the American Assn. of Museums.

When museum directors maintain personal collections, it creates potential conflicts between their own interest in acquiring works and their duty to land acquisitions for the museum, Gaudieri said.

Keller said Monday that he has followed a Bowers policy that allows staff members to collect cultural art as long as they alert the museum about what they're buying and offer it first refusal rights for anything worth \$500 or more.

Bowers officials say they have almost entirely gotten out of collecting because the museum's focus has shifted to hosting traveling shows, and it no longer has in-house curators to evaluate acquisitions.

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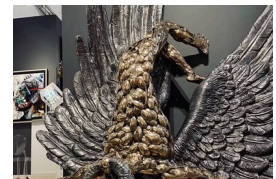
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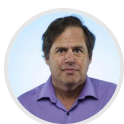
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