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# South California Museum Raids (2008)

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*In January 2008, US federal agents raided the premises of two antiquities dealerships and four art museums in California on suspicion of dealing in and acquiring illegally-exported archaeological artefacts, and enabling a conspiracy to prepare false tax returns.*

On 24 January 2008, US federal agents raided the premises of two antiquities dealerships and four art museums in California. The dealers were Robert Olson and the husband and wife partnership of Jonathan and Cari Markell, proprietors of Silk Roads Gallery in Los Angeles.

The museums were the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the Bowers Museum, the Pacific Asia Museum (PAM) and the Mingei International Museum. The raids were the culmination of an investigation conducted by the Internal Revenue Service and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that had commenced in April 2003. They were justified by evidence collected by an agent recruited from the National Park Service who had been working undercover, posing as 'Tom Hoyt', an IT specialist interested in purchasing antiquities and donating them to museums for a tax deduction (Felch 2008a). The investigation also seized sixteen international cargo shipments being imported into the USA and destined for Olson. Affidavits lodged with the US Central District of California Court stated probable cause to believe that Olson and Markell had been dealing in archaeological artefacts removed illegally from several south-east Asian countries, and, in Olson's case, from federal land in the USA, in violation of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the National Stolen Property Act and the Cultural Property Implementation Act. The affidavits further alleged that Olson and Markell had provided artefacts with falsely inflated valuations

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for tax-deductible donation to museums, and that by receiving stolen artefacts the museums had enabled a conspiracy to prepare false tax returns. The investigation centered on Ban Chiang ([https://traffickingculture.org/case\\_note/1046/](https://traffickingculture.org/case_note/1046/)) artefacts from Thailand.

Olson, 79 years old at the time of the raids, was proprietor of Bobbyo Imports, and clearly considered himself to be a 'wholesaler', importing artefacts to be sold to collectors or other dealers (USA 2008a). Olson claimed to have started importing Thai antiquities after a meeting in 1979 with Armand Labbé, curator at the Bowers Museum, who would arrange for material to be exhibited. Olson is quoted as saying that after a major display of his material in 1985, he paid \$24,000 of his own money to print a catalogue of the exhibition, and that the market subsequently 'exploded' (Felch 2008b). He bought 'hundreds and hundreds of pieces' of Ban Chiang pottery and sold them to museum curators and collectors, including Barry MacLean, a wealthy Chicago collector (Felch 2008b). Olson would visit Thailand several times a year, buying material from a network of about six intermediaries and arranging with a shipping company for it to be shipped by air or sea to Los Angeles, where he maintained a warehouse at East Anaheim (Felch 2008). He told 'Hoyt' that he had met with illegal diggers in Thailand and had photographs of looted sites (USA 2008a). He claimed that the shipping company would mis-label or mis-describe objects or make 'under-the-table' payments to Thai customs officials (USA 2008). This claim was validated in the documentation accompanying the seized shipments. For example, a Buddha statue was described as a 'sitting man', and a bronze drum was described as a 'table' (USA 2008). The possible route taken by shipments is shown on what purports to be a sample bill of lading obtained from the company Import Genius (<http://www.importgenius.com/importers/bobbyo-imports#sample>) (<http://www.importgenius.com/importers/bobbyo-imports#sample>) that gives details of a 2006 ship's cargo of 'pottery ware' being shipped by a Bangkok company for Bobbyo Imports, originating in Chiang Mai, and routed through Singapore to Los Angeles.

By the time of the 2008 raids, Olson's business seems to have dwindled. The warehouse was gone, and his material was stored at home and in various storage lockers. He was conducting business in Thailand over the phone, and in the United States was selling material on eBay (USA 2008). Olson himself attributed this decline in his business to the death of Labbé in 2005 and the loss of MacLean as major customer (Wyatt 2008a). He denied all charges of breaking US law, and maintained that the shipping company was solely responsible for any violations of Thai law (Felch 2008b).

Olson's customers included the Markells. Olsen claimed both to sell the Markells antiquities and to help them import pieces from South Asia (USA 2008b). One shipment from Thailand intercepted by ICE in 2003 was addressed jointly to Olson and the Markells (USA 2008b). Markell himself stated that he had started dealing in Thai material in 1988, at first through Olson, but also visiting Thailand himself to buy material (USA 2008b). He claimed his suppliers would attach 'Made in Thailand' labels to objects to make them look modern, and would paint the tops of statues black to make them appear to be replicas (USA 2008b).

The federal investigation gathered evidence it claimed suggested that both Olson and the Markells were engaged in practices designed to enable customers to evade tax by fraudulent appraisals of artifacts intended for charitable donation to museums. 'Tom Hoyt' made eight

separate purchases of antiquities on different occasions (Tables 1 and 2), with Olson and Jonathan Markell supplying both material and appraisal, and arranging introductions to relevant museum staff. At first, Olson used another California dealer, Joel Malter of Malter Galleries in Encino, for appraisals. But after Malter stopped supplying them with appraisals, he approached Susan Lerer, who was said by Olson to be Labbé’s girlfriend (USA 2008a). Markell prepared the appraisals himself, but validated them with an electronic copy of the signature of Roxanna Brown, curator of Bangkok University’s Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum (USA 2008b). ‘Hoyt’ also ascertained that Markell had made donations to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the name of his brother-in-law, and for at least one other named client. It was estimated that for a maximum rate taxpayer in 2008, the saving on a typical donation appraised at \$5000 would be \$700 (Wald 2008). Most donations comprised more than one object, and the objects themselves were usually of low monetary value and seemingly of limited artistic interest.

Table 1. Donations to museums made by ‘Tom Hoyt’ of material purchased from Robert Olson

| <i>Date</i>       | <i>Purchase price (\$)</i> | <i>Appraised value (\$)</i> | <i>Appraiser</i> | <i>Museum</i> |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Dec 2003/Mar 2004 | 12,000                     | 44,700                      | Malter           | Bowers        |
| Dec 2005          | 6,000                      | 18,775                      | Lerer            | PAM           |

Table 2. Donations to museums made by ‘Tom Hoyt’ of material purchased from Jonathan and Cari Markell. Purchase price includes cost of material and fee paid to Markell for appraisal.

| <i>Date</i>                  | <i>Purchase price (\$)</i> | <i>Appraised value (\$)</i> | <i>Appraiser</i> | <i>Museum</i> |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Mar 2006                     | 1,500                      | 4,990                       | J. Markell       | PAM           |
| Jun 2006                     | 1,500                      | 4,985                       | J. Markell       | Mingei        |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> quarter 2006 | 1,350                      | 4,900                       | J. Markell       | Mingei        |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> quarter 2006 | 1,500                      | 4,850                       | J. Markell       | Berkeley      |
| Mar 2007                     | 1,500                      | 4,915                       | J. Markell       | Mingei        |
| Sep 2007                     | 1,500                      | 6,000                       | J. Markell       | Mingei        |

The same day as the California museum raids, federal agents also searched the private museum of Barry MacLean, a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago. The affidavit alleged that he had acquired material from Olson, and Olson confirmed over the phone that MacLean had purchased \$50,000–\$100,000 worth of artefacts annually from him over a period of eight

to ten years (Felch and Boehm 2008). A further affidavit was issued against the Malter Galleries, mentioning dealers Michael Malter and Robert Perez. Perez is alleged to have introduced 'Hoyt' to Olson (Wyatt, 2008b).

On 9 May 2008, in a follow-up action to the January raids, federal agents arrested Roxanna Brown when she arrived in Seattle to deliver an academic lecture. Although she had previously helped the investigation (Felch 2008c), she was now alleged to have supplied Jonathan Markell with electronic copies of her signature to be used in false validation of his appraisals (Felch 2008d). She had met the Markells during the late 1990s while studying at UCLA for a PhD, and had also visited Olson's warehouse during that time (Felch 2008c). After her arrest, she was charged with wire fraud for allowing Markell to use her signature on appraisals (Felch 2008d). On the morning of 14 May she died of a perforated gastric ulcer while being held in federal custody and apparently denied proper medical treatment (Felch 2008d). The wire fraud charge against her was dropped, and in 2009 her son was awarded \$880,000 by the US government in settlement of a civil lawsuit, which accused the federal authorities of negligence and callousness at the time of Brown's death (Felch 2009).

In July 2011 the US Attorney's Office in Los Angeles stated that the investigation was still ongoing (Bennett 2011), although by July 2012 no further charges had been made in connection with the raids.

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## Related Encyclopedia Entries



### Ban Chiang

Ban Chiang is a badly looted archaeological site in north-east Thailand.

## Related Publications



Brodie, N. (2014) 'The antiquities trade: four case studies', in Chappell, D. and Hufnagel, S. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on the Detection, Investigation and Prosecution of Art Crime*. Oxford: Ashgate, pp. 15–36.

## See Also:

