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ROBERT OLSON COLLECTION



Object or Group Name

Robert Olson Collection

Case Summary

Robert Olson was an alleged smuggler who for decades illegally imported artifacts from Thailand and Cambodia, including thousands of objects looted from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ban Chiang, according to a federal indictment.

Olson was a retired steel salesman from Ceritos, California who first started buying antiquities in Thailand during visits in the 1970s. After learning that collectors and curators back home in Los Angeles were interested in such objects, he made acquiring them his life's work, buying ancient pottery, huge marble sculptures and lacquered Buddhas from Thai middlemen (including, he says, an uncle of the Thai king). Olson was also allegedly involved in the smuggling of items from various time periods in China and Native American archaeological items.

Regarding his Southeast Asian smuggling operations, Olson allegedly worked closely with Mark Pettibone, who would travel throughout Thailand and Cambodia buying recently excavated objects from looters, court records state. Pettibone allegedly bribed customs officials to export the objects with false export licenses stating they had been approved for export. They also used "made in Thailand" stickers to make them appear to be modern replicas.

After receiving the shipments, Olson sold his Thai antiquities to a network of dealers, academics and donors, who in turn donated or sold them to museums across Southern California, which often accepted them with few questions asked. The museums included LACMA, the Mingei Museum in San Diego, the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, and the UC Berkeley Art Museum. Silk Roads Gallery, a Los Angeles gallery owned by Jonathan and Carolyn Markell, also routinely bought objects from Olson.

In January 2008, more than a dozen federal agents appeared at Olson's door at 7:30 a.m. They handed him a detailed search warrant that outlined a five-year undercover operation by "Tom Hoyt," a man Olson believed to have been a computer executive and trusted client. Hoyt was in fact an undercover investigator with the National Park Service and the lead agent on a sweeping federal investigation that led to raids of several Southern California museums in 2012 and the seizure of thousands of looted objects from Ban Chiang and other sites in Thailand.

Federal authorities had covertly purchased 246 looted items from Olson during the investigation, and later seized 7,828 artifacts from his storage locations in Southern California. An additional 60 were seized from his daughter and 14 from his son, bringing the total to 8,148 total objects seized.

Prof. Roxanna Brown, a well known expert in Southeast Asian ceramics, was accused of lending her signature to inflated valuations and false provenance documents for Olson. She was arrested in Seattle, and her death in custody due to a medical emergency resulted in a government settlement with her family.

Olson told the LA Times in a 2008 interview that he knew most of the items he was buying had been illegally excavated and that taking them out of Thailand would violate that country's laws. But he emphatically denied being a "smuggler."

The federal case, dubbed Operation Antiquity, showed that museums were willing to accept looted antiquities in the wake of policy reforms triggered by the antiquities controversy at the J Paul Getty Museum. The use of the U.S. National Stolen Property Act and Thai exportation laws to declare the imported goods as smuggled has been referenced in subsequent seizures.

Olson and Pettibone were criminally indicted in 2013 on federal charges related to the illegal import and sale of the looted antiquities. Olson died in May 2017 while awaiting the start of his trial.

Number of Objects

8,148

Object Type

Vessel – pots, amphorae, vases, kraters

Jewelry – bracelets, rings, personal decoration

Culture

Ban Chiang

Various

Private Collector

Barry Maclean

Jonathan and Carolyn Markell

Museum Name

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Mingei Museum

Pacific Asia Museum

Bowers Museum

UC Berkeley Art Museum

MacLean Asian Art Museum

Museum Accession Number

Various

Receiving Country

Thailand

Sources

Raids suggest a deeper network of looted art

<https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-oldmuseum-story.html>

Intrigue but no glamour for smuggling case figure

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-jan-31-me-olson31-story.html>

Probe of stolen art goes national

<https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-oldmuseum2-story.html>

Operation Antiquity. The Ban Chiang Project.

<https://iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/operation-antiquity/>

Documents

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24171707-olson-indictment>

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24171720-olson-sw>

Images

<https://iseaarchaeology.org/ban-chiang-project/operation-antiquity/>

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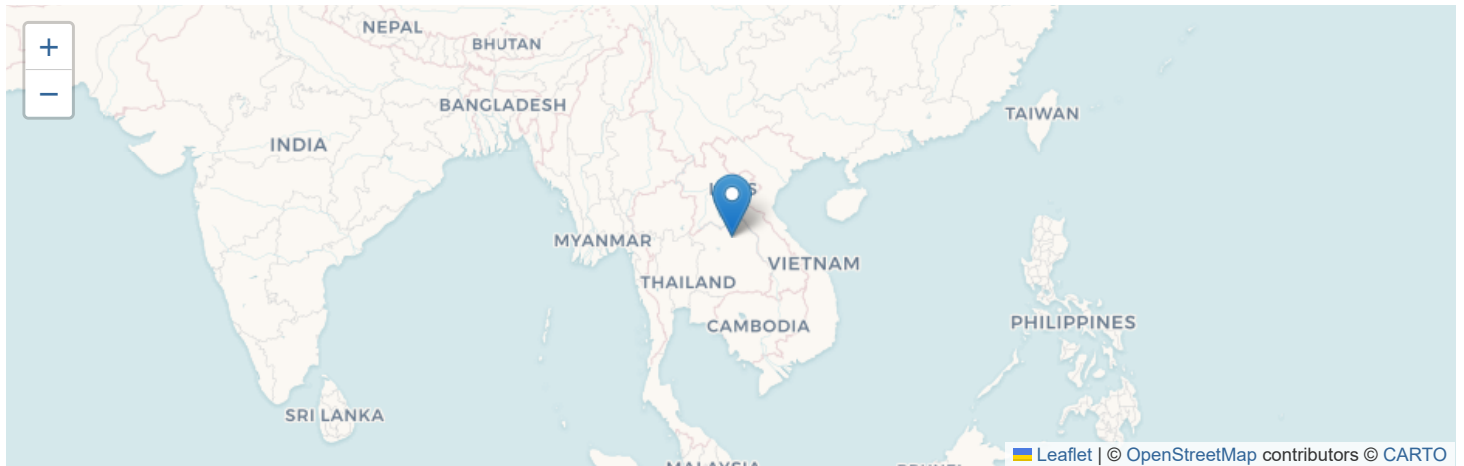
Tags

[Robert Olson](#), [Thailand](#)

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Geolocation



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