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DHS and DOJ Return Valuable, Ancient Artifacts to India

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WASHINGTON – Over 200 artifacts were returned to the government of India today by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch during a ceremony with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The items were recovered as a result of an investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the work of the United States Attorneys' Offices in the Eastern and Southern Districts of New York, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, and the Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs.

"The United States is committed to ensuring that no nation is robbed of the objects that inform its identity, shape its traditions and inspire its citizens," said Attorney General Lynch. "Today, as part of that ongoing commitment, more than 200 antiquities and cultural artifacts that speak to India's astounding history and beautiful culture are beginning their journey home. It is my hope – and the hope

of the American people – that this repatriation will serve as a sign of our great respect for India’s culture; our deep admiration for its people; and our sincere appreciation for the ties between our nations. I want to commend the men and women of the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security and the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office for recovering these priceless objects and I want to thank our Indian counterparts for their continued cooperation in our shared efforts to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of both of our nations.”

Items returned included religious statues, bronzes and terra cotta pieces, some dating back 2,000 years, looted from some of India’s most treasured religious sites. Among the pieces returned is a statue of Saint Manikkavichavakar, a Hindu mystic and poet from the Chola period (circa 850 AD to 1250 AD) stolen from the Sivan Temple in Chennai, India, which is valued at \$1.5 million. Also included in the collection is a bronze sculpture of the Hindu god Ganesh estimated to be 1,000 years old.

“Protecting the cultural heritage of our global community is important work and we are committed to identifying and returning these priceless items to their countries of origin and rightful owners,” said Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson. “It’s the responsibility of law enforcement worldwide to ensure criminal smuggling organizations do not profit from the theft of these culturally and historically valuable items.”

The majority of the pieces repatriated in the ceremony were seized during Operation Hidden Idol, an investigation that began in 2007 after HSI special agents received a tip about a shipment of seven crates destined for the United States manifested as “marble garden table sets.” Examination of the shipment in question revealed numerous antiquities.

This shipment was imported by Subhash Kapoor, owner of Art of the Past Gallery, who awaits trial in India.

HSI's Operation Hidden Idol focused on the activities of former New York-based art dealer Kapoor, currently in custody in India awaiting trial for allegedly looting tens of millions of dollars' worth of rare antiquities from several nations. Artifacts were also found in the Honolulu Museum and Peabody Essex, who promptly partnered with HSI to surrender illicit cultural property stemming from Kapoor.

HSI special agents have executed a series of search warrants targeting Kapoor's New York City gallery, along with warehouses and storage facilities linked to the dealer.

Additionally, five individuals have been arrested in the United States for their role in the scheme. The estimated value of the artifacts seized so far in the case exceeds \$100 million.

HSI plays a leading role in criminal investigations that involve illegally importing and distributing cultural property, including illicit trafficking of cultural property, especially objects that have been reported lost or stolen. HSI International Operations, through its 64 attaché offices in 46 countries, works closely with foreign governments to conduct joint investigations. Since 2007, more than 7,500 artifacts have been returned to 30 countries, including paintings from France, Germany, Poland and Austria; 15th to 18th century manuscripts from Italy and Peru; as well as cultural artifacts from China, Cambodia and Iraq.

Learn more about HSI cultural property, art and antiquities investigations. Members of the public who have information about suspected stolen cultural property are urged to call the toll-free HSI tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or to complete its online tip form.

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