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Stolen atlas with first map of California is returned to Sweden

BY MIKE BOEHM

The 1597 atlas of the New World by Flemish cartographer Cornelius Wytfliet... (Jens Ostman / KB (Royal Library...))

A first edition of a 415-year-old atlas that includes what's said to be the earliest printed map of California is back in the hands of its owner, the National Library of Sweden, from which it had been purloined along with dozens of other rare books by one of the library's own department heads.

Flemish cartographer Cornelius Wytfliet compiled the atlas, which is the earliest book of maps devoted strictly to the New World.

A news conference to announce its return -- and to generate attention that could produce leads to the whereabouts of the 55 other books that remain missing -- was held Wednesday at the office of a New York City law firm that's helping the Stockholm library, also known as the Royal Library, track down its missing volumes.

Anders Burius, who headed the manuscript department at the Swedish library, confessed in 2004 to having stolen the books over the previous decade. He killed himself shortly after his arrest.

The missing books date from 1508 to 1858. They include a 1651 edition of Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan," 1600s astronomical treatises by Johannes Kepler and Christiaan Huygens, a 1633 volume of John Donne's poems, Goethe's 1789 nonfiction book, "The Roman Carnival," and Maximilianus Transylvanus' 1523 account of Magellan's voyages, based on the author's interviews with surviving sailors from the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe.

Also missing are a mid-1700s history of Baja California by the Jesuit priest Miguel



THE 1597 ATLAS OF THE NEW WORLD BY FLEMISH CARTOGRAPHER CORNELIUS WYTFLIET... (JENS OSTMAN / KB (ROYAL LIBRARY...))

Venegas and an 1844 volume by the British artist Frederick Catherwood, "Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan."

Steven Feldman, a partner in the Herrick, Feinstein law firm that's helping with the search, said that a staff member of the Royal Library learned in June 2011 that a copy of the Wytfliet Atlas was being offered for sale by Arader Galleries in New York.

After being contacted by the Swedish library, Feldman said, Arader Galleries returned the Atlas to its previous owner -- the Sotheby's auction house in London.

Sotheby's turned the atlas over to the Royal Library on June 15, he said, and it was brought back to New York for Wednesday's ceremony.

Feldman said that the U.S. attorney's office in New York helped with the atlas' return, and that law firms in London and Germany also are helping the Royal Library track the remaining books. He said the titles have been registered with the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers and the Antiquarian Booksellers' Assn. of America, which keep databases of stolen rare books.