

For Sale: Silver Harp from the City of Ur, Van Goghs, Sumerian Vases, Dürer Prints, Ancient Coins, and Much More

The fall of Iraq in April was accompanied by cheers and celebrations, followed by chaos and looting of stores and museums. While reports about objects taken from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad were greatly exaggerated, it is estimated that 4,000 pieces – 50 of them significant – were taken. (Most highly treasured artifacts were not stolen because they had been stored away before the commencement of allied bombing raids.) While the museum is now under protection, looting persists at many of Iraq’s 10,000 registered archaeological sites, which are being pillaged by people who are armed and dangerous.

Howard N. Spiegler '74, a partner at Herrick Feinstein in New York, specializes in the recovery of stolen artwork. His recent successes include the recovery of a collection of gold and silver artifacts from 550 B.C. illegally excavated from Turkey and sold to a New York museum, as well as “Maria Magdalena,” a van Dyck painting stolen from a Dutch collector during the Nazi occupation of Holland. Assistant Editor **Jayanthi K. Daniel** asked Mr. Spiegler about the situation in Iraq and the art theft business in general.



How did you get into the business of tracking down stolen art? How do you work?

As an associate fresh out of law school, I was assigned to work on what turned out to be the seminal case in this area and the first case of a foreign government suing in the United States to recover its artwork. We represented the Weimar Museum, an East German-owned museum that had lost two Dürer paintings during the American occupation of Germany during World War II. We eventually recovered the paintings. This led to a long-term relationship with the Republic of Turkey, involving several important cases resulting in the recovery of thousands of antiquities and ancient coins that had been illegally excavated in Turkey and later purchased by museums, collectors, and dealers in the United States and abroad. During the past several years, we have been involved in important cases in which we represented families whose artworks had been looted by the Nazis and others who sought to recover stolen artworks.

On our recovery cases, we generally work with art history researchers who discover evidence pertaining to lost art in national archives, catalogues, and other sources. I have learned everything I know about art and antiquities through my legal practice.

If someone had told me when I graduated from Columbia more than 25 years ago that I would become an “art lawyer,” I probably would have responded, “What’s that?”

What kind of suits can be brought against a collector who knows or does not know he has obtained stolen goods?

A collector in possession of stolen art can be sued for conversion or replevin in the United States, regardless of his or her good faith in acquiring the artwork, because of the common law rule that one can never obtain good title to stolen property.

Just how bad was the looting of the Iraqi National Museum? Do you expect a lawsuit to be filed against the American government?

From press reports, it appears that several important antiquities and thousands of other objects are still missing from the Baghdad museum. I don’t see the basis for a suit against the United States government, however. The United States is not a party to the Hague Convention, which imposes certain obligations on occupying governments to ensure the protection of cultural property. In any event, any dispute between the Iraqi government (whenever it is formed) and the United States would have to be settled diplomatically, not by litigation.

Who is buying looted Iraqi artifacts right now?

From what I understand, looted Iraqi antiquities, some taken after the first Gulf War, likely moved to neighboring countries and then into the American, European, and Japanese markets.

It seems that in Iraq, art was stolen for the money. But with high-visibility items, such as a Matisse or a Van Gogh, do art thieves do it for the adventure, as well as the money? And, for the buyer, what's the fun of possessing a stolen work of art if you can't show it to your friends?

The trade in illegal antiquities can be quite lucrative, since the original cost to those who would buy such antiquities from the original thieves in relatively poor countries is small, and collectors are often willing to pay handsomely for such objects. I really am not familiar with the psychology of those who would obtain stolen art “for the adventure.” Objects are often taken off the market for years at a time in the hope that by the time they surface, they are less likely to be detected.

The Perfect Sleuth

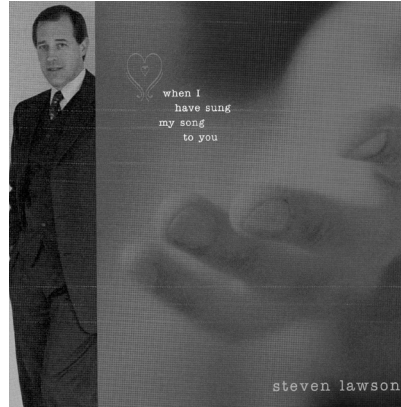
In the thick of the investigation and restoration of stolen goods from the National Museum of Iraq is Col. **Matthew Bogdanos '83**, whose master's degree from Columbia University in classical antiquities and law degree from the Law School make him an invaluable searcher. In his role as deputy director of the U.S. Central Command's Joint Inter-Agency Coordination Group, Col. Bogdanos and his team have led raids to retrieve many stolen artifacts.

A homicide prosecutor in New York who serves in the reserves, Col. Bogdanos puts looting into three categories: selective looting done by professionals; random theft by people who identified the museum with Saddam's regime; and inside jobs by people with museum connections. Among the most precious items stolen were nearly 5,000 cylinder seals from the fifth millennium B.C. that were used to seal goods and official documents. Handed down from one generation to the next, they are prized by scholars for their depictions of ancient life. A seal on the auction market can sell for more than \$400,000.

Anonymous tips have helped Col. Bogdanos and other searchers recover 1,500 various artifacts. Hundreds have been seized by customs agents at borders. In addition, a “no questions asked” amnesty program has brought back nearly 3,000 items.

Nevertheless, much sleuthing remains to be done and the colonel and Iraqi museum officials will need as much help as they can get. “I want the world to know what is gone from here,” Col. Bogdanos told the *Chicago Tribune*. “I want every beat cop in the world to be on the lookout.”

Chance Encounter with Friendly Pianist Leads to a First CD of Popular Songs



A FEW YEARS AGO, **Steven Lawson '77**, who practices general law in Chicago, was in a bar when the pianist began playing the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein standard “All the Things You Are.”

“I knew the lyrics and started to sing along,” he says. “That happened to be her favorite song, so we did a few more together.”

The pianist introduced him to other musicians in the Chicago saloon-jazz community, and he was encouraged to make a CD.

“I picked some of my favorite standards and some more recent pop gems, hired the best production facilities and first-rank Chicago musicians, and pretty soon I had a long-playing record album,” he says.

It is called *When I Have Sung My Song to You* (LoveEcho Records, 2003).

Mr. Lawson is no stranger to music. His father, an electrician, had a beautiful, classically trained baritone voice. The title cut on the CD, dedicated to him, is an a capella version of a recital piece Mr. Lawson's father recorded on acetate at an Iowa radio station after World War II. A second inspiration is Frank Sinatra, to whom Mr. Lawson tips his cap with the name of his recording company, BlueEye International.

The CD is available at Amazon.com, CDBaby.com, and CDStreet.com. ■