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TURKEY RECOVERS MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS ARTIFACT SURRENDERED BY LONDON ART DEALER TO UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

The Republic of Turkey announced today that an intricately carved walnut panel from the Sultan's prayer gallery of the Great Mosque in Divrigi, Turkey, built in the 13th Century, which had been the subject of a lawsuit by the United States Government against a London art dealer, was returned by the United States to Turkey. At a ceremony held this afternoon at the United States Attorney's Office in New York, the panel was formally presented by the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Mary Jo White, to Istemihan Talay, Turkey's Minister of Culture, and Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz, Head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Department.



Howard Spiegler is interviewed
by radio station WINS

Turkey's efforts to recover the panel began in March 1998, when it learned that the art dealer, Oliver Hoare, was offering the panel for sale at the International Asian Art Fair in New York. Turkey's Consul General in New York immediately took steps to recover this religious treasure, which was once housed in the Great Mosque, a medieval monument on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List of cultural sites recognized to be of "outstanding value". The panel had not been seen since it, along with four other panels from the Great Mosque, were discovered missing from a depository in Turkey in 1997 following a fire that was then thought to have destroyed them.

Turkey, through its lawyers, Lawrence M. Kaye and Howard N. Spiegler of the New York law firm of Herrick, Feinstein, contacted the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the United States Attorney's office, and assisted them with their investigation. In June, the United States Government sued Hoare to recover the wood panel for Turkey, invoking the Cultural Property Implementation Act, a 1983 United States law that implemented the UNESCO treaty, an international convention adopted to protect cultural property. Several months later, Hoare dropped his opposition to the lawsuit and surrendered any claim to the panel, agreeing that it should be returned to Turkey.

Meanwhile, Turkey learned that Hoare also had the four other Mosque panels, and worked with Scotland Yard in London to recover those as well. Turkey announced today that Hoare has also surrendered his claims to these panels, which are now in the custody of Scotland Yard and will shortly be returned to Turkey as well.



Larry Kaye, Howard Spiegler and an Asst. US
Attorney with the returned art.

Culture Minister Talay and Mr. Yilmaz expressed their warm appreciation to the United States Government for recovering the panel, which they described as a significant part of Turkey's cultural and religious heritage. Mr. Spiegler added that "the recovery of this priceless treasure demonstrates the close cooperation between the United States and Turkey in battling the international traffic in stolen antiquities that plagues countries around the world."

Minister Talay also welcomed Hoare's decision to surrender the panels to Turkey and urged all those who learn about antiquities stolen from Turkey to see to it that they are returned. He underscored that Turkey's vigilance will continue and that all antiquities illegally removed from Turkey will be found and "brought home."

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