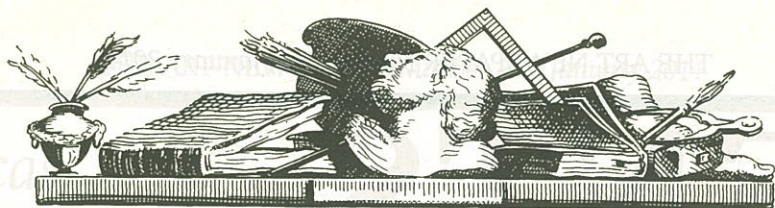


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Italy threatens to sue UK firm over ancient 'loot'

Government's liquidator rumoured to be selling disgraced dealer Robin Symes's antiquities

ANTIQUITIES

London. Italy is demanding the immediate return of a cache of antiquities stored in London and warning that if it does not receive information about the status of the collection within 30 days, it may sue the firm responsible for the objects.

As we went to press, Italy's state legal counsel was planning to send, this month, a final warning to the liquidator responsible for the assets of the disgraced antiquities dealer Robin Symes, who was declared bankrupt in 2003. Italy's letter includes a detailed list of around 700 ancient objects, including sculptures

Italy was first made aware of the rumours in 2011

and jewellery, that Italy is claiming because it believes they were taken from its territory illegally. The action is taking place amid rumours that the liquidator, the British firm BDO, is selling the material in the Middle East on behalf of Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC), which is attempting to recoup tax owed by Symes's firm, Robin Symes Ltd, which is now in liquidation. If BDO fails to respond to Italy's warning by the end of the month with detailed information on the status of each item on the list, Maurizio Fiorilli, Italy's state



After reclaiming antiquities from the Swiss in 2010 (above), the long arm of the Carabinieri is reaching towards the UK

legal counsel on the Symes case, will notify the public prosecutor at the Criminal Tribunal in Rome.

The prosecutor would then evaluate the situation and could choose to sue BDO in the UK under the Dealing in Cultural Offences Act, passed in 2003. This introduced the criminal offence of dealing in cultural objects that are "tainted" if the person or firm doing so knows the status of the artefacts in question. The maximum penalty is seven years in prison and an unlimited fine.

Italy's move follows rumours circulating in the trade and among archaeologists that BDO is attempting to sell the Symes antiquities in the Middle East, specifically to Abu Dhabi, which is building collections for numerous museums that are scheduled to open in the next few years. Italy was first made aware of these rumours in 2011, when the state legal counsel warned in a letter to a London law firm representing BDO that, should the rumours prove to be true, this would prompt

an immediate reaction from Italy and put the country's ongoing negotiations with the liquidator under severe strain.

BDO declined to comment. In a statement, a representative of HMRC said: "For confidentiality reasons, HMRC does not discuss the affairs of individual businesses. Our aim is... to collect, as efficiently as we can, the debts that are due and to prevent any situation deteriorating further, using the range of powers available to us."

Angry archaeologists

The case has angered archaeologists. "It's a scandal for the British government; they're selling [the Symes antiquities] gram by gram for unpaid taxes," says Christos Tsirogiannis, a British-based Greek archaeologist who has assisted the Greek government with its own investigation of the antiquities in the Symes collection. Tsirogiannis says that he requested access to the collection as part of his research for his PhD at the University of Cambridge but that BDO failed to respond to his queries. "It would be good to have official announcements from all the governments concerned about the Symes case, so that everyone can learn the whole truth about the key questions: why are the objects identified by the Italian state not being sent to Italy? Are the other governments concerned claiming any objects too? If so, how many and which are they?"

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Get your art kicks on Route 66



Billboards across America could feature art from the country's leading museums this year, if a scheme that was successfully trialled in the UK gets the go-ahead in the US. Richard Reed, the co-founder of Innocent Drinks, is keen to bring Art Everywhere to America. Last year, reproductions of 57 works were displayed on 22,000 advertising sites across the UK (above, Winifred Margaret Knights's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1920, in Wigan). A spokeswoman for the Art Everywhere project says that the Outdoor Advertising Association of America is "bringing together a group of people to meet in early January to take this forward". Watch this space. L.R.

Ingres's other odalisque revealed



A gallery in Paris says it has discovered a small-scale version of *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. A spokeswoman for the Galerie Hubert Duchemin believes that the rediscovered work was created by the artist in around 1830. "This scaled-down version [above] is set within a series of autograph variations performed by the artist [throughout] his career," writes Lilas Sharifzadeh, a paintings expert, in a gallery catalogue. "The work comes from a French private collection. [It] was attributed by us and then accepted by each of the Ingres scholars we consulted," she says. The definitive version of the work is in the Louvre in Paris. G.H.

St Paul's and Peter Blake part ways

RELIGIOUS ART

London. St Paul's Cathedral in London has cancelled its commission for a major new work by one of the founding fathers of British Pop art, Peter Blake. The octogenarian artist (right) had been asked to make a large-scale painting for the Knights Bachelor Chapel, funded

by a charity, the Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor.

"The Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor is no longer expecting Sir Peter Blake to complete a work for its chapel in St Paul's. The cathedral is aware of this and is in discussions with the society about other potential artists and designs," says Nicholas Cottam, the cathedral's registrar.

The painting reportedly measured 4ft by 4ft. The magazine *Metropolitan* reported in 2012 that Blake had "already missed three deadlines... [the artist] decided to paint out the figures and start again".

Blake has, meanwhile, been commissioned to create a large-scale piece for the Royal Albert Hall in London. A



was unavailable for comment. Gareth Harris

spokeswoman for the venue confirmed that "we will be doing a mural with Peter Blake" but declined to provide further details. The artist

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MUSEUMS *Middle East*

Continental Europe

Abu Dhabi museums are becoming game-changers back in the West

Sharjah opens its New Art Spaces with extreme creations

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Abu Dhabi. Which is more important: a high level, formal announcement confirming what is already a certainty except for its timing, or high level, informal behaviour of an exceptional sort? We saw both at Abu Dhabi Art, a fair with sophisticated cultural trimmings that takes place in the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) once a year.

At the fair's opening on 19 November, Aurélie Filippetti, the French minister of culture, announced that the Louvre Abu Dhabi would be inaugurated on UAE's National Day, 2 December 2015. Although there was a blip in relations in 2012, when Abu Dhabi complained that Agence France-Muséums, the organisation that is responsible for the French side of the project, was behaving in a high-handed and distant manner, the project was never in real doubt because it is a matter of state, with defence and trade interests also deeply involved.

The other episode happened the following day, after the worst storm since 1993, which caused the sand dune-shaped, metal roofed pavilion in which half the fair was housed to leak during the night. Although only one stand suffered damage, the whole fair was closed for much of the second day, and Hasenkamp shippers packed up the stands of the dealers in the pavilion. What was exceptional was that Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, the member of the ruling family who is the head of the Tourism Development and Cultural Authority, was on site until 1am, directing operations, reassuring affected dealers that most of their stand costs would be



Ryoji Ikeda's 49 xenon searchlights on Flag Island in Sharjah shone into the stratosphere for five nights

waived, and phoning cousins and local businesses to come down to the fair and start buying.

In a country where the sheikhs do not get their hands dirty, either metaphorically or literally, and snap decisions are rare because matters have to rise to the top of a very sharp pyramid of authority, this suggests a

The director of the Guggenheim noticed a new pragmatism and absence of protocol at meetings

real change of attitude, which is important because Sheikh Sultan is also in charge of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Zayed National Museum projects.

Richard Armstrong, the director of the Guggenheim, said that he also noticed a new pragmatism and absence

of protocol at meetings. So while a few dealers, especially from the region, still grumbled, none talked of suing the fair organisers and some even reported more sales than before.

As in previous years, there was a combination of international galleries such as Gagolian, Cheim & Read (which had a spectacular stand with Louise

Bourgeois's cage installation with water, *Cell XV (for Turner)*, 2000, rumoured to have been presold to Abu Dhabi), Galleria Continua, Kamel Mennour and Hauser & Wirth, which are present largely to develop their relationship with the region's future museums and galleries, such as Dubai's Isabelle van den Eynde,

or that deal in the art of the region, such as Leila Heller from New York.

But the divide between the two is much less than it was even five years ago when the fair started. Armstrong said that the process of planning the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, which will tell the story of 20th- and 21st-century art in the context of the Middle East and beyond, was actually globalising his museum's presentation of art back in New York, despite initial resistance from some curators and trustees.

The French are also adapting, and Filippetti said that at the same time as the 300 masterpieces stipulated in the contract are being chosen from their museums for the initial loan, they are expanding the range of the Louvre Abu Dhabi's collections into the 21st century, to include Emirati culture and artists. Meanwhile, two hours' drive away



Torrential rain stopped business in this part of Abu Dhabi Art

in the emirate of Sharjah, the funkier art scene in the Middle East by far, the New Art Spaces of the old city opened with "I Look to You and I See Nothing" (until 16 February), an exhibition literally about how we see and feel, with the most alarming art experience I have ever had, Kurt Hentschläger's *Zee*, which is a smoke-filled room through which you walk guided by a rail, seeing nothing but a violent strobing light; a guard hovers outside to rescue anyone who is overcome. To mention just a few of the artists in the show, which originated in Mona, the Tasmanian-based collector David Walsh's museum: Penone, Pistoletto, De Dominicis, Anish Kapoor, Lawrence Weiner and Sophie Calle. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have a personal show at the same time (subtitled "A Collective Memory", until 23 February), with a sly exhibit that gets us kneeling in a carpeted room with a kind of mihrab (the niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca) up high because that is the only way we can study the postcard-sized works all around the skirting. Is it about the idolatry of art or is it a Kabakovian joke? Whatever it is, it is quite edgy in a neighbourhood with two popular mosques just round the corner.

Anna Somers Cocks

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