

# Records Point to Dealer's Role in Artifact Theft

BY BEN PAVIOUR | FEBRUARY 22, 2017

Douglas Latchford, a globe-trotting 80-something Brit, has made a name for himself in real estate, bodybuilding and Southeast Asian antiquities collecting—the last proving the most controversial.

“Who is Douglas A. J. Latchford?” [asked the website Chasing Aphrodite](#) in a 2012 article, going on to describe a collector who denied wrongdoing in a litany of shady antiquities transactions while portraying himself as a preserver rather than pilferer of Khmer heritage.



Douglas Latchford, on the right.

Now, for the second time, Mr. Latchford's deep—and allegedly illicit—role in antiquities trading has surfaced in a lawsuit filed by authorities in the U.S.

Prominent Asian antiquities dealer Nancy Wiener, 34, was [arrested in December](#) in New York City for allegedly acquiring and selling millions of dollars worth of looted antiquities from across Asia, in a case

that experts say is the largest of its kind in decades.

The state's complaint accuses Ms. Wiener of working with "Co-Conspirator #1"—"an antiquities dealer based in London and Bangkok"—to mask the murky origins of two Angkor-era statues—collectively worth more than \$2 million—by forging documents and conducting surreptitious restorations of the items.

The details of the alleged forgery for at least one of those items, a 10th-century Naga Buddha statue, involves a publication that matches one co-authored by Mr. Latchford, a well-known English collector based in Bangkok and London who was identified in a past New York court case over an allegedly stolen Angkor-era statue.

Prosecutors claim Co-Conspirator #1 sold Ms. Wiener the stolen bronze Buddha statue for \$500,000 and then set about hiding its origins with Co-Conspirator #2, "a research consultant for an American museum," by "arranging for a photograph of the Naga Buddha to be published in a 2011 book."

In 2011, Mr. Latchford co-authored "[Khmer Bronzes: New Interpretations of the Past](#)" with Emma C. Bunker, a research consultant to the Denver Art Museum.

The 544-page tome includes two photographs of the same Naga Buddha that appears in the court complaint, with a horizontal cut through the Buddha's left arm. It identifies the statue as a late-10th century bronze statue 46 cm tall, while the statue in the court complaint also dates from the 10th century and has a height of 17.75 inches, or about 45 cm.

The court complaint notes that publishing photographs of pilfered archaeological items is a "common laundering practice" and that the statue "appeared to have been struck by an agricultural tool, resulting in a jagged break—a sign of looting."

The statue was eventually restored by a third person and put on sale at Ms. Wiener's gallery for \$1.5 million before authorities seized it in March.

The complaint says that Co-Conspirator #1 told Ms. Wiener he typically gave Co-Conspirator #2 bronze statues in exchange for false letters of provenance.

The case also suggests Co-Conspirator #1 sold Ms. Wiener a looted 11th-century Angkorian Baphuon Shiva statue that Sotheby's [auctioned for \\$578,500](#) in 2011.

"According to documents provided by informant #1, a dealer in illegal antiquities known to the District Attorney, there was an agreement between Defendant and an antiquities dealer based in London and Bangkok ('Co-Conspirator #1') to purchase and sell a Baphuon Shiva from Cambodia," the complaint says.

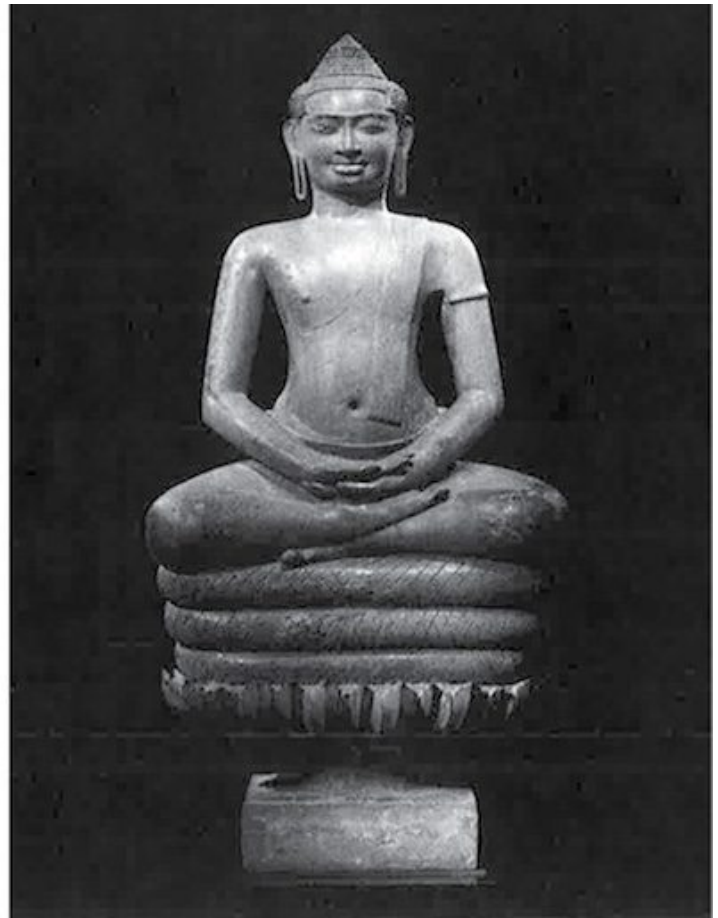
Matthew Bogdanos, the assistant district attorney prosecuting the case against Ms. Wiener, declined to comment on the identities of the co-conspirators, citing professional ethics guidelines. Mr. Bogdanos is a former U.S. Marine who authored "Thieves of Baghdad," a personal account of tracking down artifacts taken from the National Museum of Iraq.

None of the unnamed conspirators face charges. Mr. Latchford and Ms. Bunker did not respond to requests for comment.

The pair were swept up in an earlier case filed by the U.S. Attorney’s office to recover the Duryodhana warrior, a 10th-century Angkorian statue that was put up for auction by Sotheby’s in March 2011, which archaeologists believed was one of many items plundered from the ancient city of Koh Ker, in current-day Preah Vihear province.

Emails released by Sotheby’s during court proceedings outed a previously unnamed party—who had been referred to only as “scholar”—as Ms. Bunker, who in the emails described the statue as “definitely stolen,” but green-lighted the auction on the incorrect assumption that the Cambodian government had no plans to demand the artifact’s return. (The auction house eventually **agreed to return the item** in 2013.)

Mr. Latchford was named in other released **emails** and shown to have been corresponding with the auction house. In the emails, Mr. Latchford—who had until then been referred to in the case as “Collector”—first accepts and then denies that he ever owned the statue, which authorities claimed he purchased in the 1970s with full knowledge that it had been looted.



A photograph of a 10th-century Naga Buddha statue included in Emma C. Bunker and Douglas Latchford’s 2011 book “*Khmer Bronzes*,” left, and a phot of the statue that was attached to US court documents.

In “**The Stolen Warriors**,” a 2014 documentary that chronicled the statue’s return to Cambodia, Mr. Latchford said that prosecutors’ “imagination has gone wild” and told filmmakers of a secret video that would exonerate him, though he declined to share it.

“They have seen too many Indiana Jones films,” he said. “As far as I know, there is no such thing as a smuggling network, and I certainly don’t belong to any smuggling network.”



Cambodia has had laws in place forbidding the private acquisition of cultural artifacts since 1900, according to Tess Davis, a legal scholar and archaeologist, meaning any artifact acquired since then would have been obtained illegally. Auction houses vigorously dispute that legal reading, arguing relevant laws came into force as late as 1999.

In a 2011 paper, Ms. Davis found that 71 percent of the at least 377 Khmer artifacts sold at Sotheby's auctions between 1988 and 2010 lacked any published ownership history and contended that none appeared to have entered the market legally.

Subsequent **research by Ms. Davis** untangled a sprawling trafficking network stretching from poor villagers to an internationally connected art dealer in Bangkok, whom they called the “‘Janus’ interface between the licit and illicit trades.”

Ms. Davis declined to comment on Ms. Wiener's case.

Mr. Latchford has on several occasions spoken of an earlier, laxer era for collecting that connected high-profile clients with casually obtained artifacts.

In “The Stolen Warriors,” Mr. Latchford said that “in the '50s, the '60s, nobody questioned provenance.... Not for me or for anybody else.”

“I would show local governors a picture of a sculpture and ask them if they'd seen anything like it,” he told **Apollo magazine in 2008**. “One time the governor of Surin Province [in Thailand] said, ‘Oh yes, there's one lying over there in the field. I bought it and brought it to Bangkok. John D. Rockefeller bought it. It's now in the Asia Society in New York.”

“With the Khmer Rouge, availability finished till 1981,” Mr. Latchford told Apollo. “Subsequently, there has been more control by the authorities over farmers digging. The big supply is I think finished, good pieces will come only from time to time.”

The sentiment has made art preservationists wary.

Anne LeMaistre, Unesco's representative to Cambodia, **told The New York Times** in a 2012 interview that one of Mr. Latchford and Ms. Bunker's books is more or less “the inventory of the missing cultural patrimony of Cambodia.”

Other museums have raised questions about items that they acquired through Mr. Latchford.

In June 2013, the Metropolitan Museum of Art **returned two 10th-century statues** that were believed to have been plundered from the Koh Ker complex in the 1970s and which had been **donated by Mr. Latchford and other collectors**.

Artifacts donated by Mr. Latchford of dubious provenance appear in museums and private collections around the world, according to journalist Jason Felch, who runs the Chasing Aphrodite website and wrote the book “Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World's Richest Museum.”

Mr. Felch characterized the suit against Ms. Wiener as the most important criminal case in the antiquities trade since 2001.

“The arrest of a prominent dealer sends a clear signal that the antiquities market continues to [be] flooded with stolen property,” he wrote in an email.

In a [2012 interview with the Times](#), then-81-year-old Mr. Latchford said he made his fortune in the pharmaceutical and property industries, and cited a fortune teller explaining that “in a previous life I had been Khmer, and that what I collect had once belonged to me.”

Mr. Latchford also served as president of the South East Asian Bodybuilding Federation and honorary patron of the Asian Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Federation (ABPSF), whose [website shows him accepting a royal order](#) from the Cambodian government for generous donations of statues and conservation efforts to the National Museum.

Hab Touch, director of tangible cultural heritage for the Culture Ministry, estimated that Mr. Latchford and his colleagues had donated some \$500,000 to improve the museum’s lighting. Mr. Touch said that his primary focus was the return of the plundered objects, but he was not interested in discussing Mr. Latchford.

“This is our main interest: that we work hard for the return of the pieces that have been lost,” he said in December.

Mr. Latchford has claimed in the past that he agrees with the sentiment.

“I feel strongly pieces should be in the place they belong,” he told [The Phnom Penh Post in 2008](#), after making his third donation to the National Museum.

“In the speech I gave at the handover, I urged others to donate back too,” he said. “No one has come forward yet. They seem a bit reluctant.”

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