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A \$1.2 Million Ancient Persian Sculpture Seized From TEFAF New York Must Be Returned to Iran, Judge Rules

Investigators showed that the work was looted and smuggled from the country in the 1930s.

Henri Neuendorf, July 24, 2018



A 1933 photo of the reliefs in situ in Iran. Photo: New York District Attorney.

A \$1.2 million ancient Persian limestone sculpture that was seized from TEFAF New York last October must be returned to Iran, a New York Supreme Court judge ruled on Monday.

Police confiscated the eight-inch bas-relief dating to 500 BC from the booth of London antiquities dealer Rupert Wace during the fair.

Depicting a bearded Persian imperial guard holding a spear, the artifact once adorned a building at the ruins of Persepolis during the Achaemenid dynasty (the First Persian Empire). According to the New York Times, the piece was smuggled out of Iran in 1936 and resurfaced when a Canadian collector donated it to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1950. After it was stolen from the Canadian museum in 2011, Wace and business partner Sam Fogg bought it from the museum's insurance company. (The institution opted to let the insurer keep the object instead of being reimbursed.)

Wace and Fogg will not face charges for possessing the artifact. Shortly after it was seized from the fair last fall, Wace told artnet News via email that he and Fogg bought the work legally and in good faith. "We are at a loss to comprehend the events which occurred. This work of art has been well known to scholars and has a history that spans almost 70 years," he said. However, investigators presented a very detailed provenance that showed the artwork was taken illegally from Iran, and the two dealers agreed to relinquish the artifact so that it can be returned to the country from which it was stolen nearly 80 years ago.

The case is the latest successful repatriation under New York District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance, Jr. After taking office, Vance formed a dedicated antiquities trafficking unit to keep up with the rising number of such cases in New York City, a major marketplace for illegal artifacts. According to Vance, his office has returned thousands of illicit antiquities since 2012, valued collectively at over \$150 million.