



AiA Art News-service

# The Telegraph

## Chinese art heists fuels black market sales of looted treasures



Some of the items stolen from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge CREDIT: FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM/PA

- [Steve Bird](#)

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Priceless Chinese works of art stolen in audacious robberies from galleries and museum in Britain and Europe are thought to be ending up in private collections belonging to Beijing billionaires.

Experts believe some artefacts are being stolen to order in the UK with the possibility that a new breed of Chinese super-rich are trying to reclaim their country's heritage looted by invading armies, including British soldiers, during the Opium Wars of the 19th Century.

A series of heists dating back at least eight years are thought to be connected to a black market boom in the sale of stolen Oriental artefacts.

One of the first thefts believed to specifically target Chinese works took place in 2010 when a gang smashed their way into the Swedish Royal Family's Chinese Pavilion stealing items from the state collection of art and antiquities.

A few month later, thieves grabbed 56 items from the China Collection at the KODE Museum, in Bergen, Norway. Many of the pieces targeted had been collected by a Norwegian serving military officer in the latter part of the 18th and early 19th centuries.



A Dehua porcelain figurine stolen from the Oriental Museum in Durham. CREDIT: DURHAM UNIVERSITY

In 2012, a porcelain sculpture and jade bowl worth at least £3 million was taken from the Oriental Museum at Durham University. Then, thieves snatched 18 objects including Chinese jades from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

The following year, KODE museum was targeted once again with Chinese art seized.

In 2015, display cases were shattered and Oriental art grabbed at the Chinese Museum in the Chateau de Fontainebleau in Paris. There was no doubt that thieves knew exactly what they were after because they completely ignored the 1,500 other rooms in the chateau. Their haul included works looted by French soldiers who had sacked the Beijing's Old Summer Palace in 1860.

A similarity connecting the heists is that most of the stolen art has never resurfaced, raising the likelihood that it being held in a private collection.

Chinese billionaires recently outnumbered their American counterparts. Many of them have taken up art collecting, with a particular interest in antiquities from their own country forcing up prices on both the open and black market.



Other items, including a 14th century Ming jade cup, stolen during a raid at the institution's Fitzwilliam Museum CREDIT: FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM/PA

Zhao Xu, the director of Beijing Poly Auction, told China Daily: “Buying looted artwork has become high street fashion among China’s elite.”

James Ratcliffe, director of recoveries and general counsel at the Art Loss Register, the world’s largest private database of stolen and looted art, believes private Chinese buyers, rather than the government, are buying Oriental art stolen from western museums.

“There is no doubt that there has been over the last decade a spate of thefts of Chinese artefacts,” he said.

“I don’t, however, think its state sponsored. I think it’s highly likely that some of these works of art are ending up in the hands of wealthy Chinese individuals or potentially in private museums in China.

“People around the world have suffered looting of their cultural heritage. There’s a very understandable desire to see it returned.

“And in China in particular you have a combination of significant wealth and the desire for looted art to return home. There is also a widely held view that these pieces are not legitimately held in the West so there is nothing wrong acquiring them if they have been stolen from a western museum.”



There were around 1,350 designs by LeWitt (pictured here in Italy in 1972) Photo: Giorgio Lucarini; © Estate of Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy of the Estate of Sol LeWitt

“One of the initial ideas behind doing these catalogues digitally was that you can correct and update the information [easily],” says David Grosz, the editor-in-chief of Artifex Press. “You can’t do that in book form.”

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings is the seventh catalogue that Artifex has published, and there are more in the works. Organisations like museums and galleries can either pay an annual subscription to access all the catalogues available, for a fee depending on the type and size of the institution, or buy individual publications for \$300 to \$500 and pay an annual \$50 maintenance fee. In comparison, the five-volume catalogue raisonné of Andy Warhol’s paintings and sculpture, published by Phaidon, which covers around 3,000 works from 1961 to 1978 (and is still not finished), is currently priced at around \$2,000.

But more than ease or costs, what makes the digital format ideal for the catalogue raisonné, Grosz says, is its ability to draw connections. “With a book, you’re essentially looking at the list of works; there’s an index. A decision is made about how to order the catalogue, and there’s one way to look at it: front to back,” he says. “A database is a much richer format. With the digital catalogue, there are a number of different entry points.” Works in the catalogue are grouped by time period, materials and LeWitt’s idiosyncratic names for series, such as Arcs & Lines and Loopy Doopy; they can also be searched by keywords such as location and collection. “At its heart, a catalogue raisonné is a list of works,” Grosz says, “but we’re able to take any of the associated metadata and generate relationships.”