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Art Fairs

After Authorities Raided a Brussels Antiquities Fair, Some Dealers Are Calling the Agents' Widespread Confiscations 'Theft'

At the Brussels Antiques and Fine Arts Fair, authorities inspected and seized dozens of works during visiting hours.

Sarah Cascone, March 2, 2020



Grusenmeyer-Woliner's booth at BRAFA 2020. Photo ©Emmanuel Crooy, courtesy of BRAFA.

Dealers aren't happy in the aftermath of the Brussels Antiques and Fine Arts Fair, which closed at the end of January and saw Belgian authorities seize 34 ancient Egyptian, Asian, and tribal artifacts.

A dozen agents from the Belgian customs office, the Federal Public Service Economy, and Interpol descended on the international art fair on January 27, according to the *Brussels Times*. Officials began to inspect objects, which they later characterized as customary procedure.

“This fair being the most important event in Belgium on the art market, with the most expensive pieces, it is normal that the Economic Inspection is interested in it. It was a routine check,” Federal Public Service Economy spokesperson Étienne Mignolet told *L’Echo*, noting that the works in question had been confiscated “due to a suspect authenticity or provenance.”

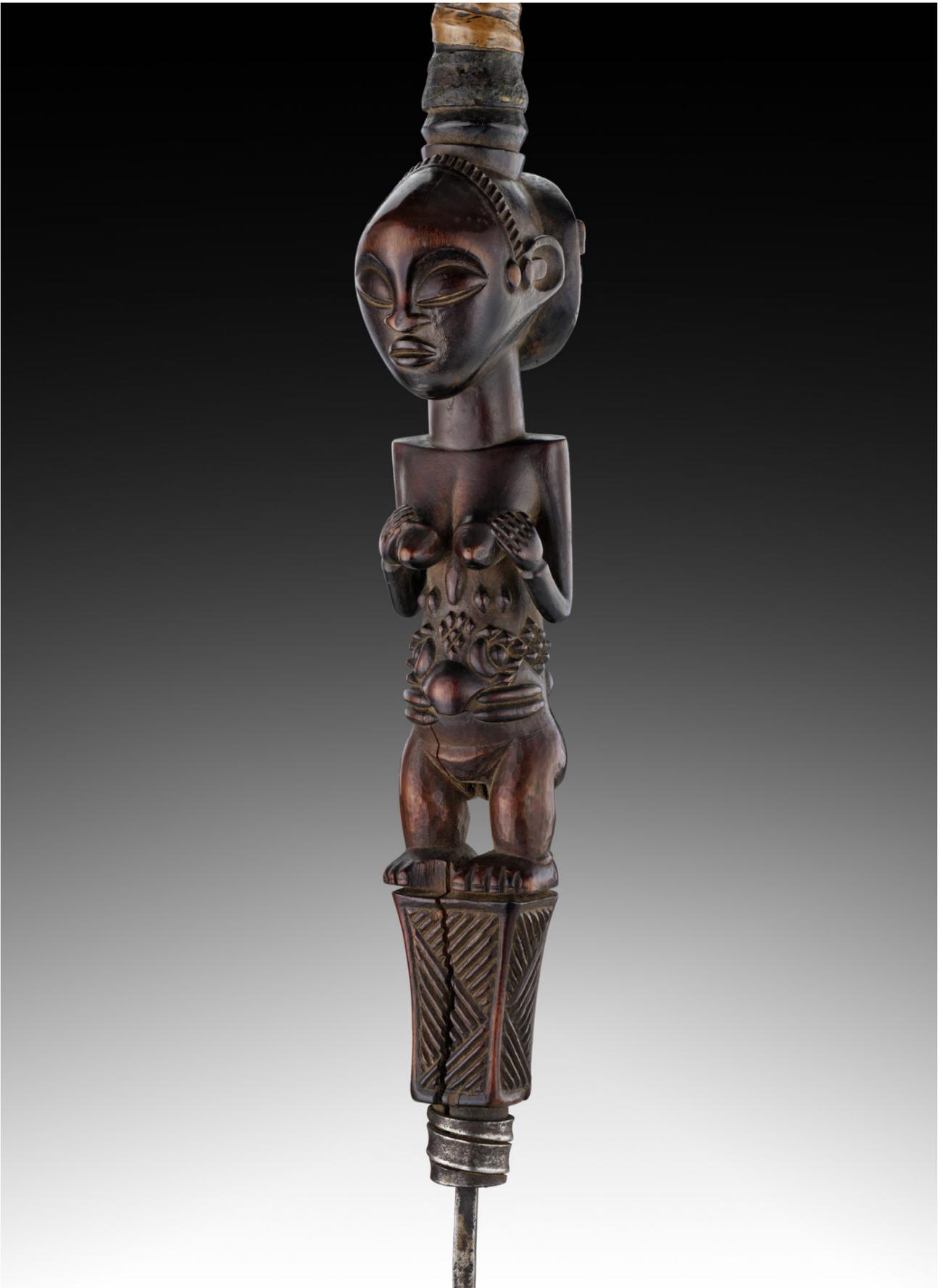
But some dealers say that the decision to move forward with a review while the fair was in progress stands in contrast to standard practice for such inspections, which typically take place ahead of a fair's opening.



Yann Ferrandin's booth of tribal art at BRAFA 2020. Photo ©Fabrice Debatty, courtesy of BRAFA.

“What happened [at the Brussels fair] was unacceptable,” Vincent Geerling, the chairman of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art, told the *Art Newspaper*. “The authorities came in and conducted checks when the fair was open to the public, with up to four officers huddling around a stand, looking at pieces indiscriminately and handling objects without permission. It’s unheard of.”

The fair itself is also coming under fire for providing the officials information about works that did not pass the vetting process. All but one of the seized works of art were among those that did not pass the vetting standards, according to the *Art Newspaper*.



Spear, former treasure of a Luba king Luba people, Republic Democratic of the Congo (late 19th century), shown by Pierre Darteville Gallery at BRAFA 2020.

Among the confiscated works was a Louba royal lance from precolonial Congo that dated between 1860 and 1880, from Paris's Pierre Dartevelle Gallery. The dealer told the Belgian newspaper *L'Echo* that he did not receive a receipt from the authorities for the object, and that "I have no choice but to file a complaint for theft."