

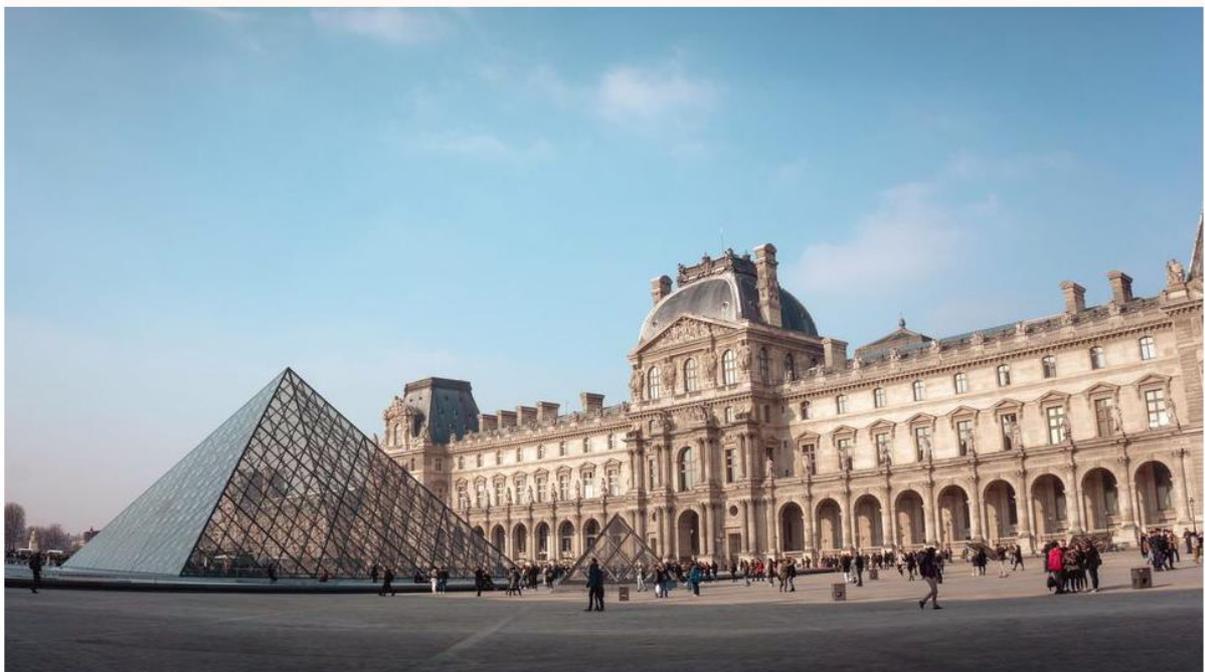
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IN ART



Former Louvre curator among five arrested in Paris in antiquities trafficking investigation

Case involves "hundreds of objects worth millions" looted from the Near and Middle East

VINCENT NOCE
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One of the suspects is a retired Louvre curator © Yeo Khee

French art police arrested five art experts this week as part of an investigation into the widespread trafficking of looted antiquities from the Near and the Middle East. According to a legal source, those arrested include a retired curator from the Musée du Louvre in Paris and

an employee of the Pierre Bergé & Associés auction house. The same source says the case concerns "the sale of hundreds of pieces for tens of millions of euros", which were allegedly looted from Egypt, Syria and Yemen as well as zones in Libya under Islamic State control. The criminal investigation into gang fraud, concealment of stolen goods, and money laundering was launched in 2018.

Without charges, the police can only hold the suspects in custody until Friday morning. Their names cannot be disclosed for legal reasons.

Pierre Bergé & Associés declined to comment on this week's arrests and the Louvre says it does not have any reliable information on the arrest of the former head of its Near Eastern antiquities department.

The Art Newspaper can also reveal that the French criminal investigation may be related to inquiries over the past eight years in New York, Belgium and Switzerland, which led to a raid last year at Brussels-based Phoenix Ancient Art. Hundreds of pieces were seized from storage in Brussels and thousands were frozen in Geneva to be checked for provenance; they have now partly been released to the gallery owners.

Hicham Aboutaam, the co-founder of Phoenix Ancient Art, says his gallery has consigned some objects to Pierre Bergé in the past, but "all were fully documented before the troubles erupted in the Middle East". He adds: "It is a disgrace for the historically active Parisian market and I hope it will be an opportunity to establish clear legal guidelines, with a global database and a repatriation mechanism, which would allow us to have a more transparent licit antiquities market."