

Antiquities resembling those looted from Jiroft offered for sale by satellite of Manhattan's Salander O' Reilly Galleries

Gallery “unaware” of concerns over objects offered on website

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1st December 2006 01:00 BST

A group of ancient artefacts that closely resemble material looted from the Bronze Age site of Jiroft in Iran were offered for sale last month on the website of Salander Decorative Arts, a newly formed division of Salander O'Reilly Galleries in Manhattan. The 13 objects, all of which were illustrated, include distinctive green-stone vessels and padlock-shaped objects carved in low relief with geometric patterns and animal motifs.

The gallery described them as “Ancient Kirman” (the Iranian province in which Jiroft is located) or “Ancient Iranian” and dated them to 2500-2300 BC, ascribing their provenance to a “private collection, New York”.

When we contacted Salander Decorative Arts, Diane Buckley, managing director of Salander O'Reilly, said: “We had no idea that there was any issue or question about these objects.” She declined to identify the person from whom they were acquired but said they were from “an established and well known source.” Ms Buckley said that the source had provided “information on provenance going back a number of years”.

“We are thoroughly reviewing [the situation] and obtaining even more comprehensive information,” she said. “We need absolute proof that this

material has been vetted by independent and established authorities.”

Ms Buckley said that none of the works had been sold. She said the gallery had immediately removed the objects from the website after we contacted them.

Holly Pittman, a University of Pennsylvania archaeologist who has excavated at Jiroft, said that the “the Salander material is certainly of the Jiroft type”, but says she would have to examine the objects in person to comment further. Her appraisal is corroborated by two other experts in Middle Eastern antiquities, who wish to remain anonymous.

In January 2004 we revealed that Bronze Age objects from Jiroft, a site 650 miles southeast of Tehran, had appeared for sale in Paris and London. The Jiroft site was discovered in 2001 by workers in Iran who stumbled upon an ancient tomb. Inside they found a hoard of objects decorated with mythological figures, animals and architectural motifs. Dozens of tombs dating from between the fourth and third millennium BC were eventually found and systematically looted for a year before the police moved in.

Artefacts from Jiroft are relatively easy to identify as they are highly distinctive. They provide the first evidence for trading links between great Mesopotamian centres such as Uruk and the ancient settlements of southwest Iran.

In 2004, a number of similar items were offered by the Barakat Gallery in London. Iran is now suing the gallery in the British courts for the return of 18 objects. In 2004, Iran hanged two looters of the site, the first time the death penalty was imposed for antiquities looting.

Since 1997, the US has banned import of any goods from Iran with the exception of food stuffs and carpets.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *'Were these objects looted from Iran?'*

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