

Mask on display at St Louis Art Museum "belongs to Egypt"

Zahi Hawass, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, is asking the museum to return an antiquity he says was looted from Saqqara

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The St Louis Art Museum is facing allegations that an ancient Egyptian mask in its collection was stolen from a warehouse in Saqqara, Egypt in the 1980s.

Dr Zahi Hawass, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), told The Art Newspaper that he believes the so-called Mask of Ka-nefer-nefer was removed from Egypt illegally and that the SCA has now asked for its restitution.

Questions about the mask's provenance were first raised by Ton Cremers, the Dutch moderator of the on-line Museum Security Mailing List, who sent an open letter to St Louis Art Museum director Brent Benjamin requesting information about how the mask had made its way into the museum collection.

Mr Cremers attached a letter by Maarten J. Raven, a curator with the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden and joint field director of Dutch excavations at Saqqara.

This states that the mummy mask currently on display in St Louis was "excavated by Zakaria Goneim in the area of the unfinished step pyramid of Pharaoh Sekhemkhet at Saqqara in the years 1951-55".

The antiquity is published with an illustration in Dr Goneim's 1957 book *The buried pyramid*. The mask "should be in storage in the so-called Sekhemkhet magazine to the south of the pyramid of Unas at Saqqara," writes Dr Raven.

Dr Raven says the storeroom at Saqqara, which contained finds from the Anglo-Dutch excavations (organised by the Egypt Exploration Society in London and the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden), was looted "after 1985". Dr Raven, who witnessed the damage to the warehouse first-hand, says that after this theft, the storage facility was dismantled and the remaining contents relocated.

Dr Hawass says: "The mask of Ka-nefer-nefer was excavated by Dr Goneim in 1952 and then, like most excavation finds, stored in the Saqqara warehouse, as property of the SCA. It was never, to my knowledge, brought to the Cairo Museum [where finds from Saqqara were sometimes stored]. Therefore, it was... stolen from the storeroom and certainly left Egypt illegally."

Dr Hawass has now notified the St Louis Art Museum of Egypt's claim and asked that the mask be returned.

Speaking to *The Art Newspaper*, museum director Brent Benjamin said: "We have responded that the museum has great respect for Dr Hawass and the Supreme Council of Antiquities and is prepared to further investigate the claim that the mummy mask is stolen."

"The museum has done extensive research and is not aware of evidence that it was improperly acquired," he says. Mr Benjamin says his museum bought the mask in 1998 from Phoenix Ancient Art, a gallery co-owned by brothers Ali and Hicham Aboutaam which has offices in Geneva and New York.

According to Mr Benjamin, the museum's understanding of the mask's provenance is based primarily on information supplied by the Aboutaams. "We were able to understand that it was excavated at Saqqara by Goneim in the 1951-52 season and then it was seen on the art market in Brussels in 1952," says Mr Benjamin.

In the 1950s the Egyptian government sometimes donated a portion of excavation finds to the archaeologists or institutions responsible for their

discovery, a practice known as partage. “We presumed that’s what happened,” says Mr Benjamin. However, according to Dr Hawass, no antiquities from the Dutch excavations at Saqqara were ever sold legally or otherwise released by the Egyptian authorities. “The Egyptian government has not practised partage with archaeologists for many years and never divided finds with Egyptian archaeologists. Dr Goneim was an official of the antiquities service, and would never have been given any objects from his excavations,” says Dr Hawass.

Speaking to The Art Newspaper, Ali Aboutaam said that Phoenix Ancient Art had done nothing wrong, and that there is no truth in the allegations made by Mr Cremers. “We do our business in the most legal way. Many things were sold from Egypt in the 1970s” before the most recent Egyptian law barring the export of antiquities was enacted in 1983.

Mr Benjamin says that the mask was not accompanied by Egyptian export papers, but when considering the purchase the St Louis Museum contacted the International Foundation for Art Research, Interpol, and Egyptian Museum director Mohamed Saleh, none of whom raised any objections to the acquisition.

“The museum pursued extensive research and did additional diligence around this mask,” he says. “It’s a very serious charge,” he acknowledges, “but in the absence of any information supporting this allegation it is difficult to act. Information may be out there of which we are not aware, and we will respond appropriately and accordingly,” he says.

“The museum takes seriously any suggestion that it illegally or improperly possesses any object in its collection. Accordingly, we look forward to working with Dr Hawass toward a fair and amicable resolution of this matter,” he says.

Last month, the museum faxed Dr Hawass all of its documentation on the mask. Dr Hawass says that the provenance is based on “the assumption that the antiquity was given to Dr Goneim, which is impossible. There is no question in my mind that the mask was stolen. It belongs to Egypt and by every standard, from the strictly legal to the ethical and moral, must be

returned immediately,” says Dr Hawass. “If we do not hear from the St Louis Museum in the very near future that they will be returning the mask we will involve Interpol and the US District Attorney, and begin legal proceedings.”

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