

A Dozen Looted Artifacts Are Returned to Lebanon

Some of the pieces were seized from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and others from the New Jersey storage unit of a Lebanese collector and dealer.



U.S. and local investigators returned 12 ancient artifacts to Lebanon on Thursday, including these marble statuettes of the mythological figures Castor and Pollux that were seized from the Met. Credit...via the Manhattan District Attorney's Office



By [Tom Mashberg](#)

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New York and federal authorities handed back 12 looted antiquities valued at \$9 million to Lebanon on Thursday, including three objects removed from the Metropolitan Museum of Art last year during a [flurry](#) of multimillion-dollar [seizures](#) there.

Taken from the museum were twin marble statuettes of the Greek mythological figures Castor and Pollux, valued at \$800,000, and a bronze sculpture on loan to the Met from [Shelby White, an art patron and museum trustee](#), which depicts a nude male worshiper and is valued by authorities at \$1.2 million.

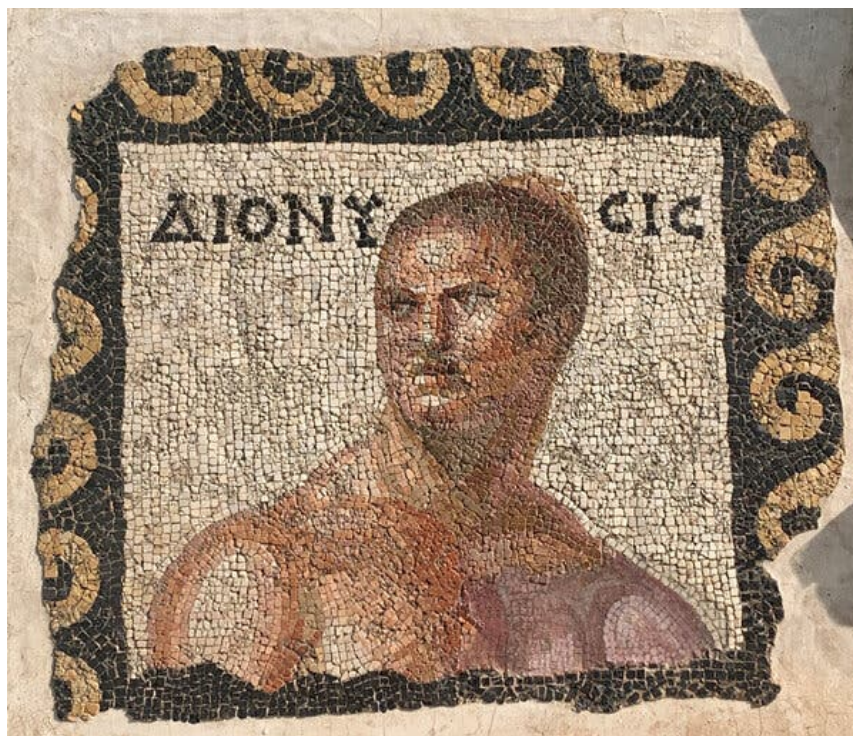
The three items were seized as part of an investigation by the Manhattan district attorney's office into several international smuggling rings. The investigation last year led to the seizure of another 27 ancient artifacts valued at \$13 million from the Met. The seizure of the three Met items returned on Thursday had not been previously disclosed by investigators.

In a statement, museum officials said, "Each of these objects has unique and complex circumstances, and with all, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has been fully supportive of the Manhattan district attorney's office investigations."

The other nine items repatriated during a ceremony in New York on Thursday were mosaics from the third through fifth centuries, when Rome ruled the Mediterranean region that includes what is now known as Lebanon. Investigators valued the mosaics at \$7 million.

The mosaics, which depict gods, gladiators and mythical beasts, were seized along with 15 other objects in 2021 from a New Jersey storage unit by officials from U.S. Homeland Security Investigations and the district attorney's office. The unit was rented by [Georges Lotfi](#), 82, a retired Lebanese-born pharmaceutical executive and sometime New York resident who collected and dealt in art.

Image



The mosaics that were returned had been seized from a Lebanese collector and dealer of art, Georges Lotfi, who has said he holds proper title to the items. Credit...via the Manhattan District Attorney's Office

At the time, law enforcement officials said Mr. Lotfi had helped them by occasionally providing information that aided antiquities-smuggling investigations over the years. For example, they said, his information helped identify the network that stole an important Egyptian relic, "[Nedjemankh and His Gilded Coffin](#)," which the Met had acquired for \$4 million in 2017 but was [forced to send back](#) to Egypt in 2019.

But by 2022, investigators said, their relations with Mr. Lotfi had soured. They said he refused to give up ownership of the items taken from his storage unit, insisting he had acquired and imported them legally. In response, prosecutors last August issued an arrest warrant charging Mr. Lotfi, who was living in Lebanon, with 24 counts of criminal possession of stolen property.

Mr. Lotfi, in interviews and [social media postings](#), has ardently proclaimed his innocence. "I was fighting with them for 10 years to stop illicit trading, and they turned against me," he told The Times last year.

In the warrant, prosecutors from the district attorney's Antiquities Trafficking Unit said Mr. Lotfi had overstepped when he expressly invited them in 2021 to inspect the storage unit in Jersey City. Investigators said they suspected Mr. Lotfi was showing them the contents as a ruse to get them to grant the objects a stamp of approval.

Image



One of the third to fifth century mosaics returned to Lebanon in a ceremony in New York on Thursday. Credit...via the Manhattan District Attorney's Office

Investigators grew suspicious, however, when they saw that many of Mr. Lotfi's warehoused items were encrusted with dirt — a sign, they said, that the objects had been illegally dug up. They added that Mr. Lotfi had no export licenses.

Matthew Bogdanos, chief of the trafficking unit, said on Thursday that Mr. Lotfi is in Tripoli, Lebanon, and is being monitored by the Lebanese authorities. He said Mr. Lotfi's passport was confiscated after Interpol put out a fugitive alert, known as a [Red Notice](#), for his arrest in May.

In an online posting last year, Mr. Lotfi said all his items "were bought from licensed traders" and legally imported. He described himself as a longtime collector who has rescued objects that might otherwise have been destroyed during his country's civil war.

At the ceremony on Thursday, officials painted a different picture.

"These pieces sat in apartments, storage units and museums when they should have been in Lebanon," the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin L. Bragg Jr., said.

Lebanon's consul general in New York, Abir Taha Audi, said in an interview that the theft of cultural objects like the mosaics had been "a plague" on her nation since its [civil war years](#), from 1975 to 1990.

"When you steal a nation's cultural heritage, you are stealing its memory, its history and its identity," she said.