

Is Japan a Cultural Looter?

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By Hisane MASAKI

Italian authorities investigate Roman antiquities in Japanese museums, just as Japan launches a global cultural offensive.

Japan still has a long way to go before completely shedding its image as a safe haven for illegal cultural traders.

The Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's biggest national daily, reported recently that Italian authorities suspect that some Roman antiquities in Japanese museums may have been looted. The Italian government plans to compile a catalog of about 100 ancient treasures and ask the Japanese Cultural Affairs Agency to cooperate in recovering them, the newspaper reported from Rome, citing unnamed Italian prosecutors.

According to the report, about 50 of the 100 allegedly smuggled items currently reside in the Miho Museum, a private museum in Shiga, western Japan, which is renowned for its collection of antique art. The antiquities in question at the museum include a sculpture and fresco painting from ancient Rome. The report did not say when the suspected items were taken to Japan.



Miho Museum

Commenting on the report, Katayama Hiroaki, head of the Miho Museum's cultural department, told the Associated Press that the museum does not know which items are suspected of having been looted, adding that the number of items believed to be from the Roman period is less than 50. "We believe our collection does not include anything that was dug up illegally. We don't know what kind of proof they have. We would like to know the details (of the allegations) as soon as possible," Katayama said.

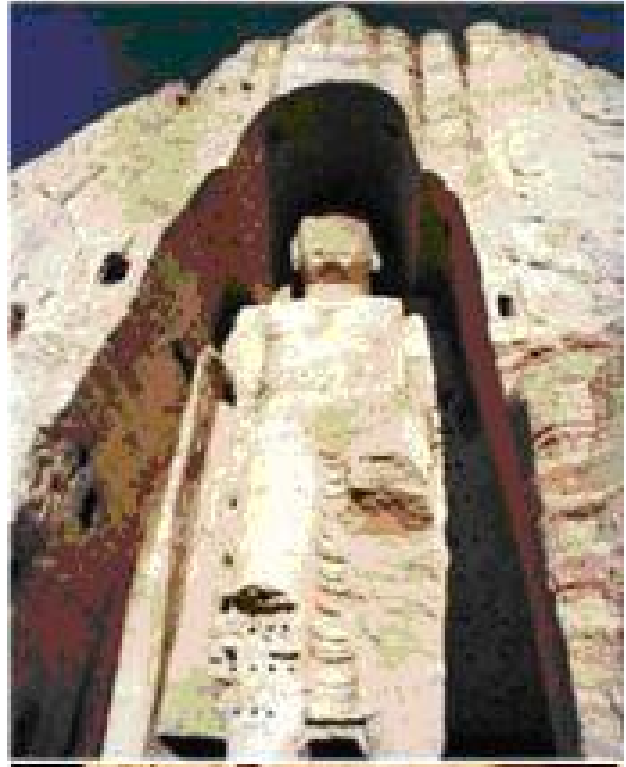
Italy has been cracking down on antiquities trafficking and campaigning to recover artifacts it contends were stolen or illegally exported from the country and sold to European and U.S. museums. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and Los Angeles' J. Paul Getty Museum have all agreed to return antiquities.

The news of Japan's suspected looting of Italian antiquities came at an awkward time for the nation, which has asserted its role as a guardian of foreign cultural assets in recent years.

Japan's parliament last summer enacted a new landmark law obliging the nation to actively promote its crusade for the preservation of valuable foreign cultural assets.

Despite efforts made for many years by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other organizations, many sites, historic monuments and other vestiges of the cultural heritage common to humankind continue to be threatened with serious degradation, and even disappearance, due to war, natural disasters and environmental destruction.

The new law, the brainchild of renowned painter Hirayama Ikuo, was introduced to the parliament by a nonpartisan group of lawmakers. Hirayama proposed the legislation in reaction to the destruction of two giant statues of the Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan -- dating back to the 6th century -- by the Taliban in March 2001 and the looting of the National Museum of Iraq during the confusion following the 2003 U.S. invasion.



The Buddha kept a silent vigil over Bamiyan before the Taliban destroyed it.

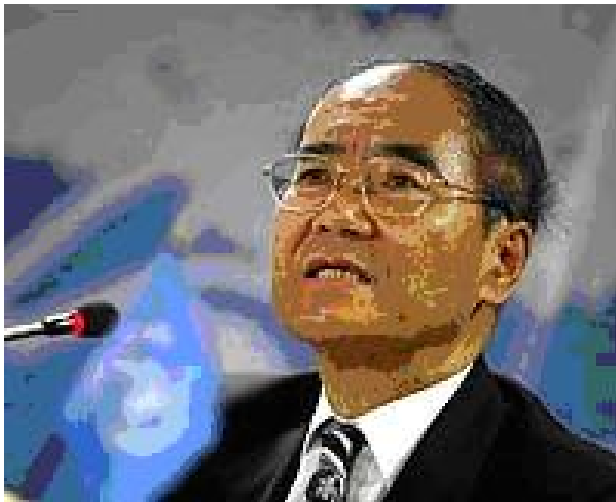
Under the new law, Japan is expected to step up official development assistance (ODA) to help countries preserve and restore their cultural heritages, especially through the fostering of human resources in developing countries. Japan is the world's second-largest ODA donor after the U.S.

The new law is the latest in a series of Japanese initiatives aimed at elevating its international status. Japan put assistance for the preservation and restoration of valuable cultural assets abroad high on its diplomatic agenda for the first time in the late 1980s.

During a visit to London in 1988, then-Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru unveiled his "international cooperation initiative," which made strengthened international cultural exchanges, along with increased ODA for developing countries and stepped-up contributions to peace, a major pillar of the

nation's foreign policy. The Japanese initiative was aimed at deflecting a barrage of international criticism that it was not making enough contributions to global peace and prosperity, despite its snowballing trade surplus.

Under this new policy of strengthening cultural exchanges, Japan began to provide financial and technical assistance to preserve cultural heritage abroad. In 1989, a trust fund with Japanese financial contributions was established within the Paris-based UNESCO. Japan has chipped in a few million U.S. dollars annually for the Japanese trust fund for the preservation of world cultural heritage.



UNESCO Chief Matsuura Koichiro

While successfully scoring diplomatic points on the cultural front, culminating in the election of Matsuura Koichiro, former Japanese ambassador to France, as the UNESCO director-general in 1999, Japan had long been far from serious about cracking down on illicit trade in foreign cultural assets at home. It was not until 2002 that Japan ratified a key international treaty banning illicit traffic in statues, paintings, manuscripts, books and other objects of historical or archeological value.

The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import,

Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was adopted in 1970 to protect cultural assets against theft, illicit export and wrongful alienation. It took effect in 1972.

Japan dragged its feet on joining the treaty for 30 years. It was only shortly before Matsuura's election as UNESCO chief that the Japanese government began full-scale consideration of domestic legislative and regulatory amendments necessary to join the 1970 treaty.

Japan's ratification of the UNESCO treaty was aimed at shedding its notoriety as a global center of illicit trade in cultural assets along with Britain. There was growing criticism at the time that Japan was actually a looter of cultural assets. It was widely believed that many precious cultural assets stolen from troubled countries, including Afghanistan and Iraq, were being traded illegally in Japan. Japan's years of inertia on the treaty clearly contradicted its professed commitment to the preservation of valuable cultural assets abroad.

With no official data being released by law enforcement authorities, it remains unclear how much -- if anything -- treaty membership has done to eradicate illicit trade in the world's second-largest economy. But some foreign cultural assets seem to be still being sold illegally in Japan, as evidenced by the recent news of suspected looting of Italian antiquities.

Critics say Japan still has to do more to cleanse its image completely as a safe haven for illegal cultural traders. There are two other international treaties concerning the protection of cultural assets that Japan has not yet joined -- the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (commonly known as the Hague Convention) and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.

The 1954 Hague Convention bans armed attacks on cultural assets and surrounding areas and construction of military facilities

nearby. Civic groups in the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara, as well as leftist groups, including the Japan Communist Party, have demanded that Japan join the 1954 Hague Convention and its 1999 protocol, which makes it legally binding to protect world heritage sites and other precious assets.

Historic monuments of Kyoto and Nara are among the Japanese properties on UNESCO's World Heritage List, along with such sites as Himeji Castle in Hyogo Prefecture, Yakushima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture and shrines and temples in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture and Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome) in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Meanwhile, Japan also remains dogged by negative legacies of its militaristic history. The question of who are the rightful owners of cultural properties is not a thing of the past in uneasy relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors, which suffered Japanese aggression or colonial rule during and before World War II.



A worker cleans a statue of Admiral Yi Sun-shin in Gwanghwamun, Seoul on March 19, 2006. Yi was a late 16th century Korean hero who vanquished Japanese naval forces in several key engagements during Japanese warlord Hideyoshi's invasion of Chosun.



Hideyoshi's invasion

Early in 2006, a two-meter-high stone monument, built in 1707 to commemorate

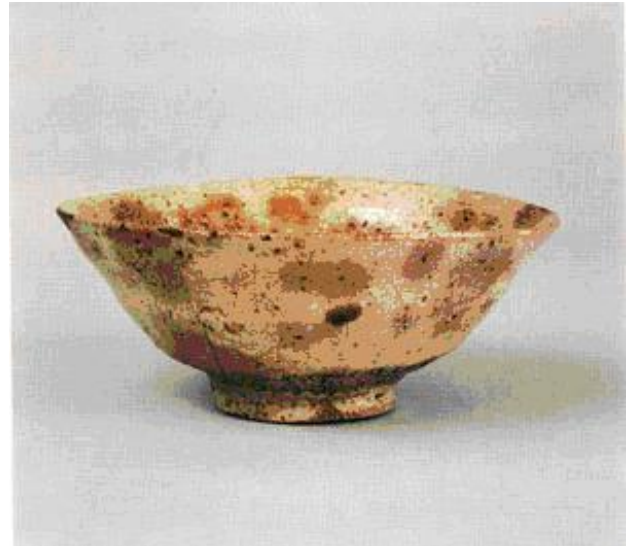
Korean militia leader Jeong Munbu's victory over Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi 's invading forces in the late 16th century and seized in 1905 by Japanese Imperial Army troops during the Russo-Japanese War from what is now North Korea, was returned to North Korea via South Korea.

Some South Korean experts claim that the number of known Korean cultural assets scattered around Japan totals about 34,000, most of which were pillaged during two periods -- the sixteenth century invasion by Hideyoshi and Japanese colonial rule of Korean from 1910-1945. Such figures cannot be verified independently, however.



The Bukgwandaechepbi, taken by Japanese soldiers in 1905, was returned to North Korea last year.

The statue had been kept at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where some 2.5 million war dead, including former Prime Minister General Tojo Hideki and 13 other Class-A war criminals, are enshrined. The monument's return came at a time when South Korea and China began to step up efforts to recover cultural relics abroad, whether they had ended up in the hands of people or organizations abroad legally or illegally.



Bowls from Gimhae, called *dawan* in Japanese, have been treasured in Japan for centuries.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Fund for Recovery of Overseas Relics, a non-government organization devoted to the recovery of lost Chinese treasures abroad, also reportedly began to send missions abroad in the spring of 2006. Japan was the group's first destination. According to the organization, over 10 million Chinese cultural relics are estimated to have been lost, most finding their way into the hands of private citizens throughout the world.

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