

Egypt statue's fate in limbo as UK export ban lapses

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Cairo

Egypt has failed to raise enough money to buy back an ancient statue from a museum in England before a British government ban was due to expire stopping the artefact being shipped abroad to an anonymous buyer who paid nearly \$24 million for it in July 2014.

The future of the 4,000-year-old statue – an exceptionally rare work depicting the royal scribe Sekhemka and his wife Sitmerit – has been in question since Northampton Borough Council sold it at auction.

A temporary export ban imposed by the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) prevented the delivery of the artefact, but the ban expired on August 28th. The buyer is now free to apply for an export licence for the work.

The Save Sekhemka group, which is lobbying for repatriation of the statue, called the sale a crime against humanity and a violation of international law.

The statue arrived in the United Kingdom in 1850

“The authorities in charge of Northampton Museum have blocked the pharaonic civilisation from the eyes of the world by selling the statue,” the group said, calling on international organisations to prevent the statue being passed into the hands of a private collector.

Egyptian Antiquities Minister Mamdouh al-Damati launched a campaign on August 22nd to collect funds to acquire the statue. But

according to Ali Ahmed, the head of the ministry's department that works on recovering pieces smuggled out of Egypt, the money has not been raised.

“We are coordinating with the Foreign Ministry to stop the sale of the statue,” Ahmed said. “Our ministry has been fighting the sale of this sculpture since 2012.”

The British DCMS had previously said its export ban could be extended if “a serious intention to raise funds to purchase the statue is made before 28 August”. But asked whether the ban had indeed been extended, a spokeswoman for the department would only say a decision would be announced in due course.

The statue depicts Sekhemka sitting in a traditional scribal pose and holding on his knees a partially unrolled papyrus, listing various offerings. He is named in an inscription as “Inspector of Scribes in the House of Largesse, one revered before the Great God”. Sekhemka's wife, Sitmerit, is shown sitting at his feet.

The statue arrived in the United Kingdom in 1850 after Spencer Compton, the second marquess of Northampton, found it in Egypt. It was later donated by his family to the Northampton Museum in about 1870.

Northampton Borough Council sold the statue to fund an extension to the museum, but Arts Council England ruled the sale breached standards on how museums manage their collections and made it ineligible for a range of arts grants and funding.

The Museums Association, the Art Fund and the International Council of Museums, as well as many Northampton residents also

opposed the sale. British and Egyptian campaigners have asked British Prime Minister David Cameron to stop the sale of the artefact.

At the time the statue was taken from out of Egypt, the country did not have laws banning the sale of artefacts. Wealthy Egyptians and foreign residents collected artefacts and even exchanged them as gifts.

The lack of artefact registration continues to be a major problem

Northampton Borough Council decided to sell the statue in 2012. Ahmed said his ministry tried to stop the sale, but was told the auction would go ahead because the museum had received the statue before Egypt had laws on the protection of antiquities.

The furore over the sale of the statue underscores one of Egypt's most serious challenges: the ability of the country to protect its remaining artefacts.

Ahmed noted there has been a “noticeable surge in the smuggling of ancient artefacts” out of Egypt since the January 2011 revolution which as well as ending the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak, led to the collapse of Egypt's security system.

In the years since the revolution, some of Egypt's museums – especially in southern Egypt – have been looted, Ahmed said, noting, however, that in 2014, the ministry managed to return some 717 artefacts that had been smuggled out of the country.

Nevertheless, the lack of artefact registration continues to be a major problem preventing Egypt from protecting its heritage, according



(Photo: Save Sekhemka Action Group's Facebook page)

Sekhemka on display in Sculpture Gallery, Northampton Museum 1990s.

to Tarek Sayed Tawfik, the head of Cairo's Central Egyptian Museum.

“This means that the government cannot protect the artefacts alone. Ordinary Egyptians must cooperate with the government to help it do this [by returning artefacts in their possession],” said Tawfik.

Before 1983, artefact exploration and sales were not banned in Egypt. Some Egyptians kept statues and relics dating back thousands of

years at their homes, which might explain how *Sekhemka* was taken from Egypt in the 19th century.

Adel Emam, an independent antiquities expert, called for filing a lawsuit in British courts against the Northampton Museum.

“The museum has the right to exhibit the statue but not to sell it,” Emam said. “If it really is short of cash, it can sell some of the expensive paintings it has.”

Lebanon's virtual museum makes art more accessible

Jimmy Dabbagh

Beirut

The collection of modern art in Lebanon has become more accessible to art lovers sitting comfortably at computer screens in their living rooms or cybercafé.

The Lebanese Ministry of Culture has launched the National Virtual Museum of Modern Art (NVMM), featuring some 500 works by contemporary and older artists.

The project was created in collaboration with experts from the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts and Balamand University.

“The Ministry of Culture has been undertaking a number of projects to further promote the Lebanese fine arts and culture. Developing the National Museum of Modern Art website goes in line with that objective,” Minister of Culture Raymond Arajji said.

He said the Ministry of Culture has a huge art collection, part of which was displayed at the presidential palace and at the government seat in the Grand Serail.

“But a significant number of the paintings and sculptures remained undiscovered, which the ministry deemed that they should be shown to the public. To do so, meant building a museum, which in turn necessitates a costly infrastructure. That is how the idea of a virtual museum saw the light,” Arajji said.

After downloading the free onsite programme needed to navigate the virtual museum, visitors can survey electronic reproductions of more than 500 artworks from the ministry's 1,800-work collection

in addition to archival footage and interviews from the artists whose works appear in the permanent collection. Currently offered in Arabic, English and French, the website is to soon include a Spanish version.

Arajji highlighted the museum's potential to make the art accessible on an international scale. “Not only would that grant the public the opportunity to have access to these otherwise inaccessible collections but also helps establish a national inventory of Lebanese contemporary art,” he said.

“On the other hand, the Lebanese diaspora can also visit the website and gain insight into the evolution of the Lebanese fine arts movement and its journey,” Arajji added.

The project team leader, Saleh Barakat, owner of Agial Art Gallery, explained the content of the website.

“The contemporary art scene is present and operating. What is missing is the historical part. For those who say ‘Why are you focusing on the older people?’, it's because the older people are not here anymore,” Barakat said.

“We are defending and preserving this memory because nobody else would have done it. Every contemporary artist has a website but who is defending Khalil Saleeby, Cesar Gemayel and Khalil Zgaib?”

A crucial first step, as Barakat asserted, was making an inventory.

“The government collection was bought directly from the artists, which makes the authentication reference fantastic. The first part of the process was really to go throughout the inventory and archive every single piece. Now we know what we have, everything

has an image and a label,” he said.

Barakat said artworks acquired before 1975 have been displayed as a first part of the project. “After 1975 [outbreak of the 15-year civil war], there was no proper system of acquisition,” he said. “They started buying again after 1992 but the pieces needed to be filtered and revisited.”

Apart from the permanent collection, the virtual museum is to offer temporary exhibitions, one featuring private collections of artworks and another dedicated to showcasing the works of promising talents.

While no plans have been announced to erect actual National Museum space to house the collection, its virtual counterpart seems a step towards offering these works a chance to be seen across the world.

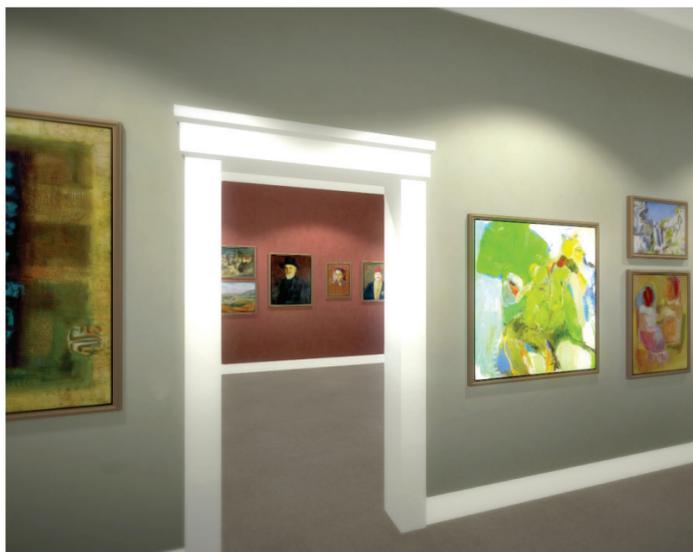
“The initiative is a great opportunity for a private-public partnership. It is part of a buzz that is trying to make Lebanon an interesting incubator for art,” Barakat said.

Michele El-mir, daughter of painter Michel El-mir, said she was delightfully surprised to see her father's works among the museum's permanent collection.

“I am very happy to know that my father will have the chance to continue his road to fame and be known among people of all generations all those years after his death. The virtual museum is a great idea and it is a real pleasure to walk through.”

To visit the National Virtual Museum of Modern Art please go to <http://www.artmodernmv.gov.lb/>

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Virtual Tours