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Cairo absent from US-French investigations into smuggling Egyptian antiquities! Dr. Hussein Duqeil

The issue of illegal trafficking of Egyptian antiquities to the Louvre Abu Dhabi continues, as the French authorities have recently arrested two archaeologists, Jean-Francois Charnier and Noemi Ducey, on charges of [fraud](#) and sale of a number of Egyptian antiquities to the Louvre Abu Dhabi without verification of their source, in return for more than 50 million euros¹.

Strangely enough, Egypt is still keeping silent about the case that the French and American authorities have been investigating over the past four years, related to the theft of Egyptian antiquities following the January 2011 revolution and beyond, and later trafficking them to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Metropolitan Museums of Art in New York by illegal means.

This paper addresses the nature of the French and American investigations into the case and the attitude of the United Arab Emirates; and attempts to understand the negative Egyptian position, emphasizing the need to change that position to be able to recover the looted Egyptian artifacts.

This case dates back to 2017, when the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum was inaugurated, as dozens of Egyptian artifacts were displayed in various halls of the newly established museum, taking into mind that some of them were artifacts borrowed from the Louvre Museum in Paris, noting that the presence of these borrowed artifacts in the Louvre Abu Dhabi is normal, based on the agreements concluded between the French and Emirati parties in this regard, which allowed the Abu Dhabi museum to borrow antiquities from the Paris museum for a few years in return for tens of millions of dollars, where the borrowed artifacts included Egyptian and non-Egyptian antiquities from the Paris Museum.

In fact, this issue was raised after finding out the presence of other Egyptian artifacts in the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, other than those that the latter borrowed from the Louvre Museum in Paris, where the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum announced that he owned them after he had officially

¹ Al Jazeera, France's arrests renew the question about the smuggling Egyptian antiquities to UAE, 31 July 2022, [link](#)



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purchased them based on related identification documents, with the mediation of officials at the Louvre Museum in Paris. However, the French authorities later found that the identification documents of the Egyptian artifacts sold to the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum were incorrect, in violation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. As a result, the French authorities launched investigations into the origins of these artifacts and how they reached the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, the American authorities also opened an investigation into a number of Egyptian antiquities that were sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with the mediation of the same French officials who had mediated the sale of other artifacts to the Louvre Abu Dhabi!

French investigations

After the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum displayed a rare pink granite painting showing a rare pink granite stele depicting King Tutankhamun in a double view, making offerings to Egyptian deities, the French scientist Marc Gabold, a specialist in Egyptology and professor at Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, informed the Louvre Museum in Paris about the mystery around the source of the granite stele, and questioned its origin. The identification papers of the granite stele claimed that it was in the possession of an Egyptian antiquities dealer, Habib Tawadros, in the 1930s. However, the name of this same person, Habib Tawadros, was linked to the case of the sarcophagus of the Egyptian priest "Nedjemankh", which was on display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2017, before it was recovered by Egypt in 2019 after it was proven that its identification documents were incorrect. This increased suspicions about that granite stele, as well as all the Egyptian artifacts that officials of the [Louvre Museum in Paris](#) mediated during the last ten years.

Investigations started through the French Central Office for Combating Trafficking of Cultural Property (OCBC), on 12 artifacts. In 2020, after an investigation with antiquities broker Christoph Konecki, it was proven that he had sold the 12 artifacts to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Metropolitan Museums of Art in New York, for a total of 56 million euros. It was also proven that the Tutankhamun granite stele displayed at the Abu Dhabi Museum was among those twelve pieces, and Konecki used seven forged documents to sell them, in partnership with the French auction house "Pierre Bergé and Partners" and the German dealer of Lebanese origin [Robin Deeb](#), and the French authorities arrested the latter in March 2022, as a main suspect in the case, and placed him under pretrial detention.

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In May 2022, the French authorities arrested Jean-Luc Martinez, the former director of the Louvre Museum in Paris, on charges of trafficking in Egyptian artifacts over the past decade, complicity in fraud with an organized gang, and suspicions of being involved in [smuggling and selling antiquities from the Middle East](#) to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Martinez was detained and interrogated for three days by the French OCBC before being released and placed on probation. The head of the Egyptian Department at the [Louvre Museum](#) in Paris, Vincent Rondot, as well as the famous Egyptologist Olivier Berdot were also detained for questioning, but they were later released without charges.

In July 2022, the French authorities arrested two former directors of the French Museums Agency (Agence France-Muséums), namely: Jean-Francois Charnier, the scientific director of the Agence France-Muséums, and Noemi Ducey, the former coordinator of the Museum of Fine Arts and Antiquities in Besançon, On charges of selling [7 Egyptian antiquities](#) to the Louvre Abu Dhabi for more than 50 million euros in a suspicious manner, as the identification papers of their source were tampered with.

In fact, this shows that the French investigations into the case appear to be serious, revealing the involvement of senior officials of the French Museums Agency.

American investigations

The US prosecution had seized five Egyptian antiquities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, possibly stolen from Egypt between 2013 and 2015, before reaching the museum. The New York Supreme Court has ordered the [confiscation](#) of the five artifacts, which include a drawing of a woman's face dating between 54 and 68 AD, valued at about \$1.2 million, in addition to small pieces of linen depicting a scene from the "Book of Exodus" dating back to the Between 250 and 450 BC, valued at \$1.6 million.

The US Attorney Office confirmed that the confiscation process was linked to the investigation of Jean-Luc Martinez, the former director of the Louvre, who had previously been accused by French authorities of complicity in fraud and concealment of the origin of the works acquired by criminal means through false documentation, especially that those artifacts had been purchased by the

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[Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York](#) from the Louvre Museum in Paris when Martinez was director of the museum.

American investigations found out that the papers of those artifacts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were signed in the name of an Egyptian dealer named Habib Tawadros, the same person whose name was associated with the Tutankhamun granite stele displayed at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the same person in whose name the identification papers of the sarcophagus of the Egyptian priest Nedjemankh were signed, as its primary owner. When the American authorities tracked everything about that person, they discovered that it was a fictitious name for a person who never existed, which aroused suspicion, especially that the name of Habib Tawadros was found on the identification papers and certificates of many Egyptian artifacts in the Abu Dhabi Museum as their first owner, which raised doubts about the illegal exit of the artifacts from Egypt by [professional antiquities dealers and smugglers](#).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York confirmed that it was a "victim of an international criminal organization," and indicated that it was ready to cooperate with the American authorities in [investigations](#), especially as the museum had previously in 2019 returned the golden sarcophagus of the priest Nedjemankh to Egypt.

It is also now clear that the American investigations into the case are serious, where the French and American investigations revolve around specific personalities, whether they were real, such as Jean-Jacques Martinez, the former director of the Louvre Museum in Paris, or fictitious, such as the Egyptian dealer, Habib Tawadros, who was proven to be a fictitious and baseless character.

The UAE attitude

During the French and American investigations, regarding Egyptian antiquities smuggled to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Metropolitan Museums of Art in New York, the [Abu Dhabi Museum](#) declared that it was the first victim of this scandal, and that it was unreasonable to be a party to it. The Museum also noted that it is a leading cultural institution known all over the world, and that it has impeccable morals in such matters, expressing the desire to reveal the whole truth and reveal all circumstances around the case.

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Commenting on the case, the [UAE Minister of Culture](#) in July 2022 stated that the UAE is participating in the current investigations, and that it always seeks to make everything clear about the source of the artifact displayed at the museum. The UAE Minister of Culture also emphasized that the UAE would respect the results of investigations.

It is also clear from the Emirati statements that Dubai's attitude towards the issue is positive, and that the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum is ready to return Egyptian antiquities to Cairo if the results of investigations lead to that, taking into mind that the Museum is keen not to harm its international reputation.

The Egyptian position

The strange thing in all this is the position of the Egyptian authorities since the launch of the case. While French investigations indicate that the five Egyptian artifacts in the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, including the Tutankhamun magnetic stele were smuggled from Egypt after January 2011, the director of the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir Square, confirmed that the stele was not among the stolen items listed in the museum [during the January revolution](#). However, Dr. Zahi Hawass, the former Egyptian Minister of Antiquities, accused Howard Carter, the British discoverer of Tutankhamun's tomb - a hundred years ago - of being behind the [smuggling](#) of the aforementioned stele.

While Dr. Zahi Hawass confirmed that there are official instructions issued to work quickly for the recovery of that stele from the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, the director of the [Antiquities Repatriation Department](#) announced that they were waiting for the results of the French investigations to consider what steps and measures should be taken.

Regarding the Egyptian artifacts smuggled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the American media indicated that [Egyptian officials](#) intend to initiate legal procedures to recover these artifacts. Arab media also confirmed that one of the prominent Egyptian antiquities experts from outside the government officials is participating in an American investigation committee affiliated with the Attorney General Office in New York, investigating the smuggling of Egyptian antiquities, and that the Egyptian contribution to the investigation included exploration and investigation about the artifacts, suspected to have been smuggled from Egypt, and [how far officials in the antiquities sector were involved](#).

Despite Cairo's success in recovering the sarcophagus of Nedjemankh in 2019, when it questioned its [possession documents](#), and filed lawsuits with the Supreme Court in Manhattan, New York in this regard, its current position on this issue is [negative and weak](#). This may be due to Cairo's fear of accusing senior Egyptian officials in this case, or it may be the result of administrative and legal shortcomings that Cairo does not seek to avoid.

Conclusion

The Egyptian authorities should move more broadly to recover Egypt's smuggled antiquities, including participation in the ongoing investigations, especially as the course of the case indicates that its results would be in the interest of Egypt, where all evidence confirmed that the Egyptian artifacts mentioned in investigations, which were illegally transferred to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Metropolitan Museums of Art in New York, and that they would inevitably return to Egypt, based on international laws. Egypt should intervene in these investigations and prove its ownership of the artifacts. If Cairo appropriately intervenes in the case, the process of recovering these antiquities to Egypt will be faster. Moreover, such intervention will give the impression that Cairo will never relinquish its rights, which makes the antiquities trade and smuggling mafia take this into account in the future.

Cairo must first work for developing the Antiquities Repatriation Department which was established years ago for achievement this purpose, but it is absolutely not commensurate with the desired goal, given that recovering Egyptian antiquities from abroad is not an easy matter. Therefore, I propose establishment of a national committee to recover Egypt's antiquities, provided that it be provided with all required human competencies, as well as the scientific, financial, legal and diplomatic capabilities that will make it capable of achieving the desired goal of its establishment².

² The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies