

Iraq displays hundreds of recovered artifacts

September 7 2010, By BARBARA SURK , Associated Press Writer



Artifacts are displayed at the Iraqi Ministry of foreign Affairs in Baghdad, Iraq, Tuesday, Sept. 7, 2010. Hundreds of Iraqi artifacts looted from museums and archaeological sites across the country have been returned to Iraq. The display is part of Iraqi efforts to repatriate its looted cultural heritage. (AP Photo/Karim Kadim)

(AP) -- Iraqi officials displayed hundreds of recovered artifacts Tuesday that were among the country's looted heritage and span the ages from a 4,400-year-old statue of a Sumerian king to a chrome-plated AK-47 bearing the image of Saddam Hussein.

The 542 pieces are among the most recent artifacts recovered from a heartbreaking frenzy of looting at Iraqi museums and archaeological sites after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and in earlier years of war and upheaval. The thefts swept a stunning array of priceless antiquities into the hands of collectors abroad.

So far, 5,000 items stolen since 2003 have been recovered, and culture officials hoped Tuesday's display would encourage more nations to cooperate in the search for 15,000 pieces still missing from the Iraqi National Museum, one of the sites worst-hit by looters after the fall of Baghdad seven years ago.

The items displayed at the Foreign Ministry Tuesday included relics of the world's most ancient civilizations.

The most prominent was the statue of a Sumerian king discovered in the 1920s at the ancient city of Ur in southern Iraq. The headless statue was stolen from the National Museum.

The FBI listed its theft among the world's top 10 art crimes. Experts say the statue, carved from black diorite with cuneiform inscriptions along the back and the shoulders, is the oldest known representation of an Iraqi monarch.

Officials with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security located the statue in the United States in May 2006 and handed it over to Iraqi diplomats in Washington two months later.

Among the newest pieces of Iraq's recovered past was a chrome-plated AK-47 with a pearl hand grip and a small image of Saddam next to the gunsight. It was taken from Iraq to the U.S. as a war trophy by an American soldier who found the rifle during a 2007 raid in Baghdad.

"Today is a celebration in Iraq. This is bringing back the civilization and the cultural heritage of Iraq," said Mohammed Muhsen Ali, deputy director of the National Museum.

Iraqi and world culture officials have for years struggled to retrieve looted treasures but with little success.

The U.S. military was heavily criticized for not protecting the National Museum's trove of relics and art after Baghdad's fall in 2003. Thieves ransacked the collection, stealing or destroying priceless artifacts that chronicled some 7,000 years of civilization in Mesopotamia, including the ancient Babylonians, Sumerians and Assyrians.

Tuesday's display also included more than 5,000-year-old cylindrical seals used by the Sumerians to seal written documents and a centuries-old pair of golden earrings from the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, just south of the present day northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

The earrings were discovered in 1988 under the floor of a palace belonging to an Assyrian king. They were stolen from the National Museum two years later and found at an auction house in New York in 2009.

The latest recoveries, made over the past five years, were hailed as a great achievement by Iraqi government officials who vowed to continue the battle to reclaim Iraq's artifacts.

"We will not stop," said Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. "We will continue our efforts in order to return the last precious pieces to their legitimate owners."

The director of the National Museum, Amira Alawan, praised the international community for helping Iraq find and recover its cultural heritage. But not all countries are cooperating, Alawan said, naming Spain and Lebanon as among the nations that have refused to hand over missing Iraqi artifacts.

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Citation: Iraq displays hundreds of recovered artifacts (2010, September 7) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-iraq-hundreds-recovered-artifacts.html>

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