

Mexico demands Sotheby's halt auction of artifacts

March 21 2013, by Mark Stevenson

(AP)—The Mexican government demanded Wednesday that the Sotheby's auction house halt the planned sale of 51 pre-Colombian Mexican artifacts, arguing they are protected national historical pieces.

The National Institute of Anthropology and History said Mexico has sent a diplomatic note to the French government seeking assistance in heading off the auction scheduled in Paris for Friday and Saturday.

It also implied that some of the artifacts offered in what is known as the 300-piece Barbier-Mueller Collection of Pre-Colombian Art are [fakes](#) or imitations.

"Of the 130 objects advertised as being from Mexico, 51 are archaeological artifacts that are (Mexican) national property, and the rest are handicrafts," the institute said in a statement.

Still, the genuine pieces are important to Mexico.

"In light of their importance for the people of Mexico, the director of the auction company has been asked to withdraw the pieces from sale," the institute said.

Sotheby's did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A description of the pieces listed on Sotheby's Paris website said that the collection's pieces have "been widely exhibited and published" and that

"many possess historic provenance."

It describes the collection as containing pre-Hispanic sculptures in wood and stone, ceramics, textiles and ritual objects from Mexico, Central America and South America, saying the collection is "representative of all the leading pre-Columbian cultures."

The Sotheby's website says the collection was started by Josef Mueller in 1920. "He became attracted by important works of pre-Columbian art, his first purchase being an Aztec 'water goddess' in Paris in 1920," it says.

The description says Mueller's son-in-law, Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller, augmented and broadened the collection.

While Sotheby's described Barbier-Mueller as "a great aesthete and man of culture," Mexico said such collections trivialize archaeological pieces.

"The [Mexican government](#) has consistently expressed its objections to the international trade in protected cultural objects, particularly [archaeological artifacts](#), and stresses that such practices strip these unique objects of their invaluable cultural, historical and symbolic essence, converting them into mere merchandise and curios," the institute said.

Under a 1972 law, Mexico prohibited the purchase and sale of archaeological pieces, but allowed some previously existing collections to remain in private hands if they were registered with the government.

While the French collection may have been assembled prior to that time, Mexico has had laws prohibiting the export of such artifacts since at least 1827.

Photos of the [artifacts](#) on the Sotheby's site show two seated depictions of god-like figures carved in stone that appear to come from Mexican pre-Hispanic cultures. The description says the [collection](#) contains Aztec, Mayan and Tarascan [pieces](#).

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