

# Asian Antiquities: Theft By a Thousand Souvenirs

By MICHAEL SCHMICKER

"John Marcus" is an ex-Peace Corps volunteer from Thailand. He's also — in his own small way — an international art thief.

In 1976, Marcus (not his real name) was preparing to return home after his assignment in Southeast Asia. He decided to take a few tasteful souvenirs with him.

Through connections in the Thai community, he located a small, 18th Century stone Buddha head from Ayudhya. It wasn't museum quality (the nose had been broken and repaired) but, unlike the fakes offered in many Bangkok antiques shops, it was genuine. So he bought it, along with a small antique Ban Chiang pot.

His next problem was how to get his acquisitions out of the country. The Thai authorities, like many Asian governments, have become increasingly alarmed at the number of unprotected temples and archaeological sites being systematically stripped by looters with dollar signs in their eyes. (Some shrines in Thailand today are populated with nothing but decapitated Buddhas.) Consequently, Thailand now has a law banning the export of any antique over 180 years old.

## Conscience Bothers

But Marcus wanted his. Somehow, they summed up his feelings for that beautiful country and its gentle people. He also felt the law was unreasonable. True, the Buddha was over 180 years old and indeed the Ban Chiang piece was 3,000 years old, but both were "minor" works of art, not irreplaceable national treasures. So with the help of the willing antique dealer, who regularly sold antiques to wealthy European, Japanese and American collectors, he shipped them out of the country in a wooden case marked "books." Four years later, his conscience still bothers him a bit, especially over the 3,000 year-old Ban Chiang pot which is carefully but proudly passed around with the brandy after guests finish dinner.

Marcus is adept at rationalizing his action. After all, he reminds those awed by the pot's antiquity, it isn't a one-of-a-kind treasure of the sort millionaires and museums acquire. The last time he checked a Christie's auction catalog, similar quality pieces couldn't find buyers above \$300.

Besides, he only brought one out of the country, not a truckload. The European free-lance photographer who first alerted him to their beauty apparently had smug-

gled out several hundred pieces of pottery ranging from common spiral red on buff painted vases to rare, 5,000 year-old, incised black pots. (Experts estimate that in the early 1970s, up to 30,000 Ban Chiang pots were illegally snatched from the poorly protected Bronze Age archaeological site in Northeast Thailand, one of the most important in Asia.)

The Ban Chiang pots were merely another way to finance the photographer's travels. He even saw merit in his operation. "Look at it this way," he told Marcus, "I'm preserving Thai culture. The Zurich businessman who buys one of these pots will take better care of it than the Thai government can ever afford to."

## Pillaged Treasures

The photographer's greed made Marcus feel better. He was different. He hadn't bought his for resale; he merely wanted a small souvenir of his time in Thailand. If all else failed, the newspapers would periodically remind Marcus that some of the biggest dealers in pillaged antiquities were themselves Asian — from petty upcountry bureaucrats to powerful politicians' wives.

Yet, deep down, after all the comparisons are complete, all the extenuating circumstances explored, all the excuses rattled off, Marcus knows something's wrong. Somebody had to knock a head off a statue somewhere in Thailand for him to have his pride and joy. Somebody else had to disturb an excavation site, or steal out of a storehouse with a pot under his arm, for him to carry home his other prize.

Buyers create sellers, whether the buyer is the well-endowed, internationally-renowned museum or John Marcus with his modest budget. Either way, Thailand loses.

Airline pilots, international bankers, businessmen, UN officials, development advisers, journalists, generals, retiring diplomats — it seems they all want an increasingly larger piece of Asia's awesome artistic past. While UNESCO focuses its attention on American and European museums busily acquiring illegally exported \$600,000 bronzes, individuals, who've come to live and work in Asia for a while, busy themselves with the "minor" treasures.

Their little thefts aren't on the scale of the Elgin marbles, but collectively they're beginning to hurt.

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