

US team in TN to help return stolen idols

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Puducherry: A team of investigators from the US Department of Homeland Security is on a two-week tour of Tamil Nadu to identify the origin of various idols they had seized from art thief Subhash Kapoor's Art of the Past gallery in New York.

On Monday, senior special agent Brenton M Easter, special agent John Paul Labbat and investigator Rangarajan Gopalan had detailed discussions on this with the Pierre Grard, director of the French Institute of Pondi-



Pics: IFP / EFEO

US investigators with Pierre Grard (3rd from left), director of the French Institute of Pondicherry; (right) the stolen idol

cherry (IFP), and researcher (Indology) N Murugesan.

IFP's photo documentation of the idols at Ariyalur

temples that Kapoor's gang looted have helped to provide evidence of the provenance of the statues. Their photo-

graph provided clinching evidence in the case of the stolen Nataraja in Australia that paved the way for its return recently.

While Homeland Security officials have seized many Kapoor antiquities, on Monday they were interested in locating five idols: a Ganesha that is presently in a museum in Ohio, US, and statues of Murugan, Vishnudurga, Sambandar and Buddha. The team wanted to compare the photos they had with photographs with IFP.

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US team to seek institute help to trace idol theft

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“The team confirmed that the Ganesha idol, which is presently at a museum in Toledo, was stolen from Sripuranthan temple in Ariyalur district, but could not get any vital leads about the source of other idols. We have to trace our records for the photos of the Buddha to compare with the photos in their possession,” said Murugesan.

The US team is seeking the guidance of the institute in tracing the temples from where the idols were stolen and sold across in the nation.

In March, the Toledo Museum of Art that had bought the Ganesha statue from Kapoor told TOI that it would be ready to return the idol if there was reasonable evidence that the statue was stolen. Kelly Fritz Garrow, the director of communications at the museum located in Ohio, told TOI, “If we are not the legal owners of the idol

we will return it. We don't want stolen objects.” Responding to a TOI report in Monday's edition, Fritz Garrow said US Justice department officials were in touch with the museum.

She said, “it would be great if the museum was presented with scientific evidence” but if that is not available then the museum will make a determination based on the evidence available.

Fritz Garrow said in the case of the Kapoor acquisitions, including the nearly 1,000-year-old Ganesha, there was a lot more circumstantial evidence.

Yet another candidate for return is the Uma in Singapore Asian Civilisations Museum. This bronze idol has a clear evidence showing that it was stolen by Kapoor from the Shiva temple, Ariyalur. Museum authorities there said, they are waiting for communication from the centre before deciding on returning it.