# Sotheby’s postpones auction of Buddha relic jewels following India’s legal challenge



# Sotheby’s Postpones Controversial Auction of Buddha Relics Amid Legal Threat from India

In a significant development that highlights the ongoing tensions between cultural heritage and commercial interests, Sotheby’s has postponed its scheduled auction in Hong Kong of a collection of sacred jewels linked to the historic remains of the Buddha. This decision came in response to a legal notice issued by the Indian government, which contended that the sale would violate both national and international laws, and that the relics are an integral part of India’s cultural and religious heritage.

The collection, comprising items discovered in 1898 by British archaeologist William Claxton Peppé, includes not only exquisite jewels and relics but also bone fragments attributed to the Buddha. These artifacts, believed to date back to around 240-200 BCE, were unearthed in northern India, specifically at Piprahwa in Uttar Pradesh. Sotheby’s has characterised this find as one of the most extraordinary archaeological discoveries of the modern era, yet their intention to auction the items has sparked significant backlash from Buddhist scholars and leaders, who argue that such commodification disrespects the sentiments of millions of adherents worldwide.

India's Ministry of Culture has taken a firm stance, highlighting the items' sacred nature and demanding their repatriation, alongside a public apology from both Sotheby’s and Peppé’s descendants. The ministry accused the auction house of disregarding international conventions, asserting that the relics should be treated with the reverence they command. Legal repercussions, along with public advocacy efforts, were warned if these demands were not met. Responding to the intensity of the situation, Sotheby’s announced the postponement of the auction and has since engaged in discussions with the consignors, their promotional materials now removed from the auction house’s website.

Furthermore, this incident raises broader ethical questions surrounding the market for sacred art and cultural artifacts. Critics argue that the auction undermines core Buddhist values and contributes to the ongoing narrative of colonial exploitation and the commodification of sacred heritage. Observers have noted that this is not an isolated instance; similar disputes have emerged involving other cultural relics in auction houses globally.

Chris Peppé, a descendant of the archaeologist, has defended the auction, claiming that it represents a transparent and fair opportunity for public access to these historical items—a stance that has ignited further debate. While some relics were responsibly donated to museums in India and other Buddhist countries, the jewels have remained with Peppé's family since their discovery. This situation underscores the complexities involved in the ownership and ethical considerations surrounding historical artifacts.

Furthermore, this controversy aligns with a growing trend seen in recent years where indigenous communities and countries are actively seeking the return of ancestral artifacts from institutions and individuals abroad. The case echoes similar outcries, such as those advocating for the return of other cultural items, signifying a larger movement towards recognising and rectifying historical injustices related to colonial appropriation.

As discussions continue, the outcome of this case could set a significant precedent regarding the handling of cultural artifacts and the responsibilities held by auction houses in their sale practices. The postponement offers a temporary reprieve, allowing for meaningful dialogue that could shape future interactions over the shared stewardship of cultural heritage.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiXEFVX3lxTE80RHhjd19sck9iM1BXUFJJel9wQnFqU05zVmU1b0x5WXh4dEdxVk4xZldkZll6cmNjdXRvN3N1U1hXRGQ4T1ExNWczMG9aQWRNLUJhSnFMdUZkNS1U0gFiQVVfeXFMT1FlV0NtZ0d1WDJUc1ZBeHkzbFlxMVE1OF9BNm85V0hzUTB0cDNfQTkyUDVURktrNnJONGlDRnlpRVNWa3QwTDRMOXBiZEZJenNsM2tyOWk1STVfZnFsVC1LNGc?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/bc8e57a840347b577e81afb717ecc16b), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/sothebys-postpones-auction-gems-linked-buddha-after-india-threatens-legal-action-2025-05-07/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiXEFVX3lxTE80RHhjd19sck9iM1BXUFJJel9wQnFqU05zVmU1b0x5WXh4dEdxVk4xZldkZll6cmNjdXRvN3N1U1hXRGQ4T1ExNWczMG9aQWRNLUJhSnFMdUZkNS1U0gFiQVVfeXFMT1FlV0NtZ0d1WDJUc1ZBeHkzbFlxMVE1OF9BNm85V0hzUTB0cDNfQTkyUDVURktrNnJONGlDRnlpRVNWa3QwTDRMOXBiZEZJenNsM2tyOWk1STVfZnFsVC1LNGc?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en), [[4]](https://elpais.com/cultura/2025-05-07/hong-kong-suspende-una-subasta-de-reliquias-de-buda-despues-de-que-la-india-pidiera-su-repatriacion.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/bc8e57a840347b577e81afb717ecc16b), [[5]](https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2025/05/04/las-joyas-de-buda-salen-a-subasta-y-desata-un-debate-etico-global-sobre-el-mercado-del-arte-sagrado-cadena-ser/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/bc8e57a840347b577e81afb717ecc16b), [[6]](https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/uk-auction-house-withdraws-sale-of-naga-human-skull-amid-outcry/article68736089.ece)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/sothebys-postpones-auction-gems-linked-buddha-after-india-threatens-legal-action-2025-05-07/), [[4]](https://elpais.com/cultura/2025-05-07/hong-kong-suspende-una-subasta-de-reliquias-de-buda-despues-de-que-la-india-pidiera-su-repatriacion.html)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiXEFVX3lxTE80RHhjd19sck9iM1BXUFJJel9wQnFqU05zVmU1b0x5WXh4dEdxVk4xZldkZll6cmNjdXRvN3N1U1hXRGQ4T1ExNWczMG9aQWRNLUJhSnFMdUZkNS1U0gFiQVVfeXFMT1FlV0NtZ0d1WDJUc1ZBeHkzbFlxMVE1OF9BNm85V0hzUTB0cDNfQTkyUDVURktrNnJONGlDRnlpRVNWa3QwTDRMOXBiZEZJenNsM2tyOWk1STVfZnFsVC1LNGc?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/bc8e57a840347b577e81afb717ecc16b> - Sotheby's postponed an auction in Hong Kong involving jewels associated with the relics of the historical Buddha following intervention by the Indian government. The jewels, dated between 240-200 BC, were discovered in 1898 in northern India within reliquaries alongside Buddha's corporeal remains by British excavator William Peppé. India’s Ministry of Culture issued a legal notice demanding an immediate halt to the auction, asserting that the relics are sacred and part of the inalienable cultural and religious heritage of India and the Buddhist community. The government accused Sotheby’s of violating Indian and international laws and UN conventions, and demanded the relics’ repatriation and a public apology from the auction house and Peppé’s descendant, Chris Peppé. The ministry also warned of legal and public advocacy actions if the demand was ignored. Upon receiving the notice, Sotheby’s complied and announced an auction postponement in agreement with the item consignors to allow discussions. Subsequently, Sotheby’s removed some of the auction information from its website. The Indian Culture Ministry expressed satisfaction with the postponement, crediting its intervention for the outcome.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/sothebys-postpones-auction-gems-linked-buddha-after-india-threatens-legal-action-2025-05-07/> - Sotheby's has postponed the auction of a historic collection of jewels associated with Buddha's corporeal relics, known as the Piprahwa Gems of the Historical Buddha Mauryan Empire, dating back to circa 240-200 BCE. This decision follows strong objections from the Indian government, which warned of legal action and demanded the return of the items. In a letter to Sotheby’s, India asserted that the relics are an inalienable part of its cultural and religious heritage and their sale would violate Indian and international laws, including United Nations conventions. The controversy has also drawn criticism from Buddhist scholars and religious leaders, who claim the auction offends the sentiments of over 500 million Buddhists and undermines core Buddhist ethics and sacred traditions. Originally scheduled to be held at Sotheby’s headquarters in the Asian financial hub, the auction was delayed by mutual agreement with the consignors to allow time for further discussions. All promotional material and online notices related to the auction have since been removed. Sotheby’s had previously hailed the 1898 discovery of the relics at Piprahwa in northern India as one of the most significant archaeological finds in history.
4. <https://elpais.com/cultura/2025-05-07/hong-kong-suspende-una-subasta-de-reliquias-de-buda-despues-de-que-la-india-pidiera-su-repatriacion.html> - Sotheby's en Hong Kong suspendió la subasta de 300 reliquias budistas sagradas tras recibir una solicitud legal del gobierno de la India para su repatriación. Las reliquias, halladas en 1898 por el británico William Claxton Peppé en Piprahwa (Uttar Pradesh, India), incluyen fragmentos óseos, joyas y relicarios vinculados al Buda y están valoradas en unos 100 millones de dólares. Aunque una parte fue entregada a un museo en Calcuta en 1899, algunas piezas quedaron en posesión de la familia Peppé. El Ministerio de Cultura indio considera la venta ilegal por violar leyes nacionales e internacionales y busca su devolución para su conservación y veneración religiosa. También ha solicitado disculpas públicas a Sotheby's y a los descendientes de Peppé, además de iniciar una campaña para denunciar la venta como un acto de injusticia colonial. Chris Peppé, uno de los herederos, defiende que ha colaborado con museos y desarrollado un sitio web para divulgar las reliquias. La suspensión proporciona tiempo para dialogar entre las partes implicadas.
5. <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2025/05/04/las-joyas-de-buda-salen-a-subasta-y-desata-un-debate-etico-global-sobre-el-mercado-del-arte-sagrado-cadena-ser/> - Un conjunto de joyas descubiertas en 1898 junto a los supuestos restos de Buda en Piprahwa, India, será subastado el próximo 7 de mayo en Hong Kong por Sotheby’s, generando un intenso debate ético. Las piezas, que incluyen unas 1.800 perlas, piedras preciosas y láminas de oro, estuvieron bajo la custodia de la familia del arqueólogo británico William Claxton Peppé, responsable de la excavación. Aunque parte de los restos fueron venerados en países budistas como Tailandia, Sri Lanka y Myanmar, las joyas fueron conservadas por la familia Peppé y algunas exhibidas en museos. Esta es la primera vez que se ofrecen a la venta. Mientras Sotheby’s asegura haber verificado su autenticidad y legalidad, líderes budistas y expertos denuncian la comercialización de objetos sagrados como una falta de respeto. Chris Peppé defendió la subasta como la opción más justa y transparente tras considerar alternativas inviables como la donación. La venta ha reabierto un debate global sobre los límites éticos del mercado del arte sagrado y la apropiación del patrimonio espiritual.
6. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/uk-auction-house-withdraws-sale-of-naga-human-skull-amid-outcry/article68736089.ece> - A U.K. auction house has withdrawn a ‘Naga Human Skull’ from its lots for a live online sale on Wednesday (October 9, 2024) following outcry in India over the issue. The Swan auction house at Tetsworth in Oxfordshire had a series of skulls and other remains originating from around the world as part of ‘The Curious Collector Sale, Antiquarian Books, Manuscripts & Paintings. The ‘19th Century Horned Naga Human Skull, Naga Tribe’ was slotted as Lot No. 64 and resulted in protests in Nagaland, led by Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio who sought the intervention of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to stop the hurtful sale. The FNR asserted that the auction of the human remains contravenes Article 15 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which says: "Indigenous Peoples have a right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information." FNR then contacted the auction house directly to condemn the sale and to call for the object to be repatriated to Nagaland.
7. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/uk-auction-house-withdraws-naga-skull-sale-after-nagalands-protest-6756419> - A UK auction house has withdrawn a 'Naga Human Skull' from its lots for a live online sale on Wednesday following outcry in India over the issue. The Swan auction house at Tetsworth in Oxfordshire had a series of skulls and other remains originating from around the world as part of 'The Curious Collector Sale, Antiquarian Books, Manuscripts & Paintings. The '19th Century Horned Naga Human Skull, Naga Tribe' was slotted as Lot No. 64 and resulted in protests in Nagaland, led by Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio who sought the intervention of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to stop the hurtful sale. The FNR asserted that the auction of the human remains contravenes Article 15 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which says: "Indigenous Peoples have a right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information." FNR then contacted the auction house directly to condemn the sale and to call for the object to be repatriated to Nagaland.