# British Museum faces scrutiny over ancient Egyptian artefact provenance



A significant incident has resurfaced involving the British Museum and its acquisition of an ancient Egyptian artefact, raising concerns about the validity of provenance documentation linked to illicit antiquities trade. The artefact in question is part of a collection of 590 items seized by US authorities from Ashraf Omar Eldarir, a 40-year-old individual who arrived at New York's JFK Airport on 19 January 2020, claiming the items were inherited family heirlooms. Eldarir has since pleaded guilty to four counts of smuggling.

Upon inspection at the airport, customs officers noted the odour of wet earth emanating from Eldarir's baggage, and sand spilled out, suggesting recent excavation of the artefacts. Officials confiscated 41 gold items and a significant quantity of figurines known as shabtis, which were traditionally used in funerary contexts. The total value of the contraband items was estimated by Eldarir to be around $300.

Following the seizure, investigations led to the revelation that a shabti within the collection had been sold to the British Museum for $400. Allegations surfaced that the museum may have been misled by what experts refer to as the “dead dad provenance” technique, wherein the seller claims objects were part of a deceased relative's collection to circumvent legal restrictions surrounding the sale of antiquities.

Paul Barford, a British archaeologist well-versed in artefact hunting and market dynamics, expressed concern over the authenticity of the provenance provided. "Anyone can fake an old document and use whatever names they want on them,” Barford told The National. “I'd take that with a huge pinch of salt unless there was independent evidence to support it.”

Details from the British Museum's website depict that the shabti was attributed to Ezz el-Din Taha El Dharir, Eldarir's grandfather, who purportedly acquired the items in Egypt in 1946. The museum records indicate that the artefact was sold by Dr Ashraf El-Dharir, who provided documentation linked to the family's ownership. This documentation had apparently been constructed to assure integrity regarding the artefacts' origins.

Morris Khouli, the antiques dealer who facilitated the sale to the British Museum, has his own history of smuggling antiquities, having been convicted for tax-related transgressions in 2012. Moreover, Khouli has also been known to provide falsified provenance for other artefacts he has sold. Experts note that the practice of presenting items as part of a family's historical collection, particularly those claimed to originate from family members long deceased, is a common tactic that can easily mislead buyers, including institutions.

Rick St Hilaire, a cultural heritage lawyer, remarked on the critical nature of due diligence in authentication processes, stating, “It starts with knowing the person you're dealing with. Second, listening to their story carefully.” He described the phenomenon of fabricated provenance as a widespread occurrence, cautioning that those involved in antiquities transactions must be diligent and sceptical, especially in light of tales that seem too elaborate to be true.

Demands for scrutiny have been echoed by various figures in the archaeological and legal communities. Concerns have also been raised over the British Museum’s protocols for assessing provenance, especially given a recent incident in which over 1,800 items were found to be missing or mismanaged within its collections.

In response to inquiries regarding the artefact's provenance and ongoing investigations, a spokesperson for the British Museum stated that they are committed to supporting law enforcement inquiries and ensuring comprehensive due diligence in their acquisition processes. The museum asserted that they are actively researching the provenance of the shabti.

As the investigation unfolds, it appears that the British Museum and the wider community will continue to grapple with the complexities of provenance and the ongoing challenges posed by the illicit antiquities trade. Meanwhile, additional artefacts allegedly linked to Eldarir’s family's collection are reportedly available for sale, reflecting a broader challenge within the art market regarding authenticity and ethical sourcing of cultural heritage items.

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