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Return of the gods

Nepal's stolen religious images are coming home.

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But do we put them inside museums or restore them to their original places of public worship and risk losing them again?

In a few weeks, if all goes according to schedule, a 12th-century- stone sculpture of Uma-Maheshwor stolen from Wotol in Dhulikhel in 1982 will be returned to Nepal. The figure was sold to several art dealers and museums before ending up on a lonely pedestal in the Museum fur Indische Kunst (Museum of Indian Art) in Berlin.

The return of the Uma Maheswor is part of a new trend in which religious and historical artefacts are being returned to their rightful owners in Greece, Egypt, Cambodia and Thailand by museums and private collectors in Europe and North America.

The 62-cm-tall limestone sculpture showing Shiva Parvati and attendant deities in Mount Kailash had been bought by the Museum of Berlin in 1985 from a reputed art gallery in Wiesbaden for DM 100,000 (then\$ 50,000). The museum's Director Marianne Yaldiz, who is bringing the figure back to Nepal, said in Berlin last week that the art dealer who sold it to the museum has disappeared.

As in the case of earlier sculptures which have been restituted, this figure was also identified as the stolen Uma Maheshwar from Dhulikhel after activists drew the museum's attention to the book *Stolen Images of Nepal* by Lain Singh Bangdel, the eminent Nepali artist and art historian (far right).

The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation has decided to temporarily place the stolen figure in the newly renovated Patan Museum which specialises in displaying stolen religious figures and idols that have been recovered, but the question this decision raises is whether or not the idol should be reinstated at its original place at Dhulikhel.

Many stolen idols recovered and reinstated in Nepal have been stolen again due to poor security provisions. A bronze sculpture of Mani Ganesh at Patan serves as a telling example: while in the process of being exhibited at Patan Museum, the locals discovered it to be the lost idol of the nearby Ganesh temple. The idol was returned and placed back at the temple only to be stolen again. Fortunately, the idol was re-recovered and re-reinstated at its shrine. Recently it was decapitated, and the head is probably on its way to the hands of Western art dealers.

Returning an Uma-Maheshwor to its original mount is even more tricky since it seems to be a particular favorite of the collectors. It therefore becomes even more important to check and recheck the security provisions at Dhulikhel.

Wolfgang Koellisch, a German architect at the Dhulikhel Municipality comments: "If the locals agree, the best thing to do will be to have a replica of the idol at Dhulikhel while the original is exhibited at the Patan Museum."

A good idea, but will the locals worship a religious object they know to be fake?

The Uma-Maheshwor was being worshipped by hundreds of Dhulikhel devotees when it was stolen in 1982. In Berlin it was just a piece of sculpture admired by connoisseurs for its artistic finesse. And if it is tucked away in a glass case in Patan Museum, Uma and Maheswor will be safe, but there won't be much difference between being in Berlin and

being in Patan.

Lain Singh Bangdel himself feels that it is the devotion that gives these figures life. He says: "The stone idols are not mere objets d'art but pieces made 'alive' by veneration. Till the day they were stolen those idols were being revered."

Agrees Kanak Mani Dixit, writing in *Himal South Asian*: "(T)he smuggled Valley images were part of a living culture rather than merely part of archaeological heritage."

In Dhulikhel's Wotol, the locals have no doubt that they want the real thing. "Do everything you can to bring it back, please," said 75-year-old Nanimaya to a journalist when she was shown a copy of Lain Singh Bangdel's *Stolen Images of Nepal* with the original image of Uma-Maheshwor at Dhulikhel. The mount where the Uma Maheswor stood is presently occupied by a piece of rock, but the vermilion and flower offerings on it show that even the spot is regarded as sacred by local people.

Bangdel's 1989 book, *Stolen Images of Nepal* (Royal Nepal Academy, 1989), has been used by Nepali and Western activists to secure the return of other Nepali deities. In 1999, four other religious pieces were returned and they are in safekeeping at the National Museum in Chhauni. An unnamed private American collector returned the decapitated 12th-century Veenadharini Saraswati stolen from Pharping, the ninth-century Buddha stolen from Patan, a 14th-century Surya stolen from Panauti and a 10th-century Garudasana Vishnu from Kathmandu. All were stolen in the 1980s.

Bangdel's book includes photographs of ancient statues and religious objects in their original states as well as the condition of the places after the plunder.

Bangdel said in an interview last year: "I felt it was important to provide strong and authentic photographic evidence of sculptures which were stolen from the valley and surrounding areas". Most of the religious objects in Nepal were stolen during a decade of accelerated plunder in the 1980s. Some researchers, like Juergen Schick, believe that the only reason the thefts declined was that there was nothing left to steal, or what was left was too heavy to lift and smuggle out.

Schick has worked closely with Bangdel, and his own book has recently been translated into English: *The Gods Are Leaving the County* (White Orchid Books, 1999). Even so, there have been a rash of thefts in the past two months of friezes and toranas of temples, where small pieces are wrenched out of larger ones.

It is because of the work of Schick and Bangdel that it has now become impossible for a collector with a conscience or a museum in the West to keep religious objects that were stolen from Nepal. There will be more gods returning home, but what we have to decide is whether we stick them into well-guarded museums or restore them to the places of public worship and risk losing them again.



Uma-Maheshwor Gallery B at Patan Museum