



How **smart** are you?

Click Here



powered by MSN Search

Go

Microsoft

Print | E-mail | Discuss | Alerts | Newsletters | Help

Slate

- Home
- News & Politics
- Arts & Life
- Business
- Sports
- Technology
- Travel & Food
- Output Options
- About Us

Search Slate

Go

Advanced Search

Get 2 months of unlimited Internet access

FREE!

Try it now!



culturebox Arts, entertainment, and more.

Raiders of the Lost Art

Why didn't we protect the National Museum and Library in Baghdad?

By Meghan O'Rourke

Posted Thursday, April 17, 2003, at 4:28 PM PT

Click [here](#) to see a slide show.



The deputy director of the National Museum amid the devastation

informed by archaeologists of the value and importance of these institutions and in fact had drawn up a "No Strike List" of sites to avoid during its shock and awe campaign—a list that included the National Museum. On April 17, the chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on Cultural Property submitted his resignation to President Bush citing "the wanton and preventable destruction" of Iraq's National Museum of Antiquities.

The Bush administration and the military have made it sound as though the extensive looting of three major Iraqi cultural institutions in Baghdad this past weekend was not foreseeable. At a Centcom briefing April 15, U.S. Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks said, "I don't think anyone anticipated that the riches of Iraq would be looted by the people of Iraq." But in fact the administration had reason to suspect that this looting would happen. During uprisings within Iraq after the first Gulf War, nine of 13 regional museums, in Dohuk and elsewhere, were systematically looted. Many of these artifacts appeared on the international black market. It shouldn't have been a surprise that widespread theft would take place again during an interregnum in Baghdad. What's more, the Pentagon had long ago been



The remnants of the National Library

If, like me, you know little about Mesopotamian art, the reports that emerged over the weekend might have found you unable to judge just how significant the loss was. By now it's clear that it's horrifically extensive: Archaeologists in the United States consider the National Museum of Antiquities, thoroughly sacked, to be among the 10 most important museums in the world. It was to Mesopotamian art what the Louvre is to Western painting. It maintained a collection of international antiquities dating back some 5,000 years. Needless to say, many Arab countries and civilians are taking its destruction personally. And yet this destruction was largely unnecessary.



Famous head of an Akkadian ruler

Among the important pieces of art missing is a 4,300-year-old bronze mask of an Akkadian king that is featured in most books of ancient art history. It was on the cover of one of my high school textbooks; I remember wanting to touch its nubby beard. Also gone is a small limestone statuette of a prince, circa 3300 B.C.; jewelry from the royal tombs of Ur dating to 2500 B.C.; a solid gold harp from the Sumerian era; a series of small ivories dating to the eighth

century B.C.; second-century B.C. Parthian sculptures from Hatra; and a collection of around 80,000 cuneiform tablets that contain examples of the some of the world's earliest writing.

The museum's comprehensive collection was unprecedented. Saddam's secularism and his long-term interest in Iraq's archaeological legacy—in part self-serving; he inscribed his name next to Nebuchadnezzar's in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon—had enriched the National Museum's collection. (According to a *Financial Times* piece from 2000, Saddam reportedly made extensive suggestions in the margins of all reports filed by Iraq's archaeological director, Donny George. He also made antiquities smuggling punishable by

Also in Slate

News & Politics



Eight Questions About the War

Now that Gulf War II is officially over, when is Gen. Tommy Franks going to give his big briefing ... [More](#)

Arts & Life



Those Crazy Carnies

Whatever happened to those new primitives from a decade or so ago—the pierced, tattooed kid ... [More](#)

Arts & Life



Slouching Tiger

As a rule I don't like to attack other critics, but how in hell did the pedestrian ... [More](#)

TOP HEADLINES



- [Iraqi sees new government in weeks](#)
- [American scraps executive bonuses](#)
- [New videotape of 'Saddam' aired](#)
- [China to admit far more SARS cases](#)

death.)



A Parthian male divinity figure

But it's hard to know exactly what's been lost. Because of the U.S. embargo, few American archaeologists had even been in Baghdad since 1991. Several I spoke with noted that we can't rule out the possibility that Saddam Hussein and Baath Party officials [may have been selling off items over the years](#). (In 2000, when the National Museum reopened after renovations for damage done during the first Gulf War, a BBC correspondent wrote that many exhibits and treasures previously at the museum were missing.) One suggested that the initial estimate of 170,000 stolen objects would turn out to be high.



An Iraqi man outside the museum's ransacked vault

The destruction wrought in [the National Library](#) and the Ministry for Religious Affairs, on the other hand, is irreparable: The buildings were burned nearly to the ground. As Michael Sells, a professor of comparative religions at Haverford College and a co-editor of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, explained, we'll never have a chance to buy back, on the black market, all the books and manuscripts that were burned—nor will we discover them someday in a criminal's closet. Among them were

extensive antique manuscripts that are not available in print, and thousands of illuminated and handwritten Qurans, now in ashes.



An armed guard protecting empty shelves

How could this happen? The looting of the museum occurred in two waves, according to witnesses and to international art and antiquities experts. The first appears to have been executed by [insiders equipped with glass cutters](#) and other tools. Apparently, they knew what they were looking for. The thieves opened glass display cases without smashing them and penetrated the locked vaults in the museum. The second wave of looting was what's known as opportunistic—the kind that Donald Rumsfeld described as the natural exuberance of a country working off the nervous energy occasioned by regime change.



Attack of the Lion, gone

The Pentagon has defended its non-action by saying that it agreed to protect the sites *during battle*, as distinct from [any looting that came afterward](#). Splitting hairs, anyone? The United States could easily have done more to stop the ransacking. The looting of the museum began on Friday; it extended, according to a BBC radio report, for three days, at which point there still were no guards posted outside the building. Numerous

newspapers quote Iraqi citizens who saw American patrols impassively watch as looters carted away vases, jewelry, pots, and other goods. The *Guardian* [reported on Monday](#) that U.S. Army commanders had just rejected a new plea from desperate officials of the Iraq Museum for aid. And the fires at the National Library and the Ministry of Religious Affairs took place two whole days after the looting of the museum began. Americans ought to have protected the museums, just as we posted Army patrols outside the National Ministry of Oil.

The military's inaction doesn't seem to have been a question of choosing between protecting civilians and guarding gold jewelry. The *Chicago Tribune* [reported](#) that the U.S. military successfully assigned men to chip away a disrespectful mural of former President George Bush on the floor of the Al Rashid Hotel, even though it failed to protect the museum and library from being plundered.



Why didn't anyone act? How hard would it have been for someone to call Tommy Franks and say, "This is getting out of hand"? Put bluntly, it seems like the administration just didn't care enough to stop it—an indifference that's part and parcel with its general attitude toward anything other than its military objectives. Rumsfeld appeared genuinely annoyed even to have to answer questions about the ransacking of the museum and library: "We didn't allow it to happen. It happened," he said. This ham-fisted diplomacy immediately gave rise to anti-American conspiracy-mongering: Nine British



A female mask from the National Museum

archaeologists [suggested](#) that, in turning a blind eye to the looting, the Bush administration was succumbing to pressure from private collectors to allow treasures to be traded on the open market. Others have suggested the administration wanted the world to feel the symbolic weight of the destruction of Saddam's regime.



A few remaining books from the library

What's to be done now? If they haven't already, the military might start by posting guards at the museum—even as a token symbol of respect. Today, UNESCO is holding an emergency meeting in Paris to refine strategies for dealing with the catastrophe. According to antiquities experts, the best chance for recovering the stolen art is seizing it at the borders of Iraq (which U.S. troops are patrolling in the hopes of keeping Baath officials from escaping). A group of archaeologists, including John Malcolm Russell, a specialist in Mesopotamian archaeology at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, have drawn up guidelines of what the military should look for, and are urging the U.S. government to offer amnesty and a small reward for all those who have "found" Iraqi art. But for the

military to take on this responsibility, the administration itself needs to convey the urgency of the matter—which it has only just begun to do: On Thursday, the FBI announced that it would help in the search to recover antiquities. Although Colin Powell has promised that the United States would help rebuild the city's National Museum, no U.S. official has yet apologized—and there've been few or no words from Bush on the issue.

Only two of the thousands of pieces of art that were stolen after the first Gulf War were recovered, McGuire Gibson, who teaches Mesopotamian archaeology at the University of Chicago, has said. Even if a sculpture of a bronze Akkadian king isn't important to the Bush administration, you'd think its own self-interest would be: In the eyes of the world, the war's success will be measured as much by what happens now and over the coming months as by the shock and awe campaign. And the United States now has a black mark that it could have avoided.

Click [here](#) to see a slide show.



Related on the Web

For a comprehensive site charting what the destruction of the museums, click [here](#) or go to the Internet [page](#) for the H-Museum, the *Humanities and Social Sciences Online's* mailing list for "Museum Professionals."

Advertisement



[Eyelet Embroidered Dress](#)

\$188.00

Boned strapless dress with grosgrain trim and allover eyelet embroidery. Fully lined. Cotton/spandex. Imported. [Saks Fifth Avenue](#)
[Lilly Pulitzer](#)

Meghan O'Rourke is a *Slate* senior editor.

Photograph of, respectively: National Museum Deputy Director Mushin Hasan by Mario Tama/Getty Images; a man near a pile of papers in the burned-out National Library by Mario Tama/Getty Images; bust of an Akkadian ruler by Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis; a Parthian male divinity figure by Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis; an Iraqi man at the entrance of the vault of the National Museum by Jerome Delay/AP Photo; a stack of books in the hallway of the National Library by Dusan Vranic/AP Photo; an antiquity known as the Attack of the Lion by Werner

...of the ...
Forman/Corbis; a female mask from the National Museum by Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis; an armed guard at the National Museum by Ramzi Haidar/AFP Photo.

Slate

More culturebox

[Why didn't we protect the National Museum and Library in Baghdad?](#)
posted April 17, 2003
Meghan O'Rourke

[Rating the news networks' theme music.](#)
posted April 17, 2003
Adam Baer

[The irony behind the demise of the *Partisan Review*.](#)
posted April 16, 2003
Sam Tanenhaus

[Why America's love affair with Irish poetry should include Dennis O'Driscoll.](#)
posted April 16, 2003
Adam Kirsch

[Slate's guide to books on the second Gulf War and the Middle East.](#)
posted April 8, 2003
Ed Finn

Search for more [Culturebox](#) in our archive.



What did you think of this article?
Join the Fray, our reader discussion forum
[POST A MESSAGE](#) [READ MESSAGES](#)

Remarks from the Fray:

...I do know a little something about Mesopotamian art and I was very sad to hear about the looting of it which has taken place. But you wonder why the US military didn't have a plan in place to protect it? Gee. Could they have possibly been a little preoccupied with this thing that was going on at the time called A War?! The protection of the Iraqis' oil infrastructure was one thing, and the dams. But now the military has to worry about artwork? I can imagine the letter from the commanding officer to the widow: "...Just know that your husband died like a soldier: while defending a 3,000 year old bas relief of the Sultan of Ur."...

--EarlyBird

(To reply, [click here](#))

...I respect the voices of those who say that all of this was foreseeable and avoidable. But, I have to admit, even as an opponent of the war, I didn't see this one coming. My gut feeling was that we would be unleashing anarchy into the country, and that where anarchy reigns, *something* bad is bound to happen. I expected that Shi'ites might be imposing strict Islamic rule, of which we see the first signs as women are now told to be veiled before coming to pray in what was Saddam City. But the specifics of what anarchy will bring are always a surprise. Talk about shock. Talk about awe. I hold no brief for Saddam and his dipping people into vats of acid. But this pillaging of not just Iraq's cultural patrimony, but of *civilization's* cultural patrimony, pushes the balance sheet for this war firmly into the red. Yes, I'm glad Saddam is gone. But this war itself was a failure. Any transition that invited this anarchy without adequate provisions to contain it is necessarily a failure. We are Napoleon shooting off the nose of the Sphinx, but to the hundredth power. And History, what remains of it, will judge us as such.

--Major_Danby

(To reply, [click here](#))

(4/18)