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10 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
11 NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
12 SAN FRANCISCO DIVISION
13

14 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,) CASE NO.
15)

16 Plaintiff,)

17 v.)

**VERIFIED COMPLAINT FOR CIVIL
FORFEITURE *IN REM***

18 TWO ONE-THOUSAND-FIVE-HUNDRED-)
19 POUND, HAND-CARVED LINTELS)
20 REMOVED FROM RELIGIOUS TEMPLES)
IN THAILAND,)

21 Defendants.)

22 The United States of America, by its attorneys, David L. Anderson, United States Attorney, and
23 Chris Kaltsas, Assistant United States Attorney for the Northern District of California, brings this
24 complaint and alleges as follows:

25 **NATURE OF THE ACTION**
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27 1. This is a judicial forfeiture action *in rem*, as authorized by Title 19, United States Code,
28 Sections 1595a, 1604, and 1610.

2. This Court has jurisdiction under Title 19, United States Code, Section 1595a(c)(1)(A) and Title 28, United States Code, Sections 1345 and 1355, as the defendant property constitutes merchandise which was introduced into the United States contrary to law, as the property was stolen, smuggled, and/or clandestinely imported or introduced into the United States.

3. This action is timely filed in accordance with Title 19, United States Code, Section 1621.

4. Venue is proper because the defendant property is currently located in this district. See Title 28, United States Code, Sections 1355(b) and 1395(a)-(c).

5. Intra-district venue is proper in the San Francisco division within the Northern District of California.

PARTIES

6. Plaintiff is the United States of America.

7. The defendant property includes two Thai lintels, which were originally located in Buriram and Sa Kaeo (also known as Sra Kaew) provinces, Kingdom of Thailand. The defendant lintels were removed from the Kingdom of Thailand without permission. The purpose of this action is to forfeit, and thereby extinguish, the claimed interests of any claimants prior to repatriating the defendant property to the Kingdom of Thailand.

FACTS

8. A lintel is an architectural element of a structure that spans the space between the two ends of a threshold to an entrance way. In certain cultural traditions, including ancient Thai art and architecture, lintels serve both functional and decorative purposes. The defendant property, which constitutes two lintels originally located on ancient religious temples in Northeastern Thailand, is a prime example of the decorative lintel and material art traditions in Southeast Asian art.

9. On or about September 24, 2016, the Consul General of the Royal Thai Consulate General in Los Angeles, California visited the Asian Art Museum (the “Museum”) located in San Francisco, California. The Consul General observed the defendant property on prominent display in an

1 exhibit at the Museum. Upon seeing the defendant property, the Consul General spoke with a Senior
2 Curator at the Museum, who informed him that the defendant property had originally been donated to
3 the City of San Francisco, which created, and continues to maintain, the Museum. See Exs. A and B,
4 Photographs of Defendant Property. The Consul General expressed his desire to see these lintels
5 returned to Thailand. The Museum, however, made no further communication with the Consul General,
6 or any Thai official, until after the United States initiated the instant investigation.

8 10. On or about May 31, 2017, the Thai Minister of Culture (the principal executive of
9 Thailand's Ministry of Culture) met with the Chargé d'affaires at the United States Embassy in
10 Bangkok, Thailand, along with a Special Agent from Homeland Security Investigations, United States
11 Department of Homeland Security. At the meeting, the Minister informed the Chargé that Thai officials
12 had reviewed evidence concerning the cultural significance of the defendant property at the Museum.
13 The Minister indicated that Thailand's Fine Arts Department, a subdivision of the Ministry of Culture,
14 had concluded that the defendant property constituted two lintels from monuments in Buriram and Sa
15 Kaeo (also known as Sra Kaew) provinces in Thailand. Moreover, the Minister indicated that the Thai
16 government was interested in the return of these two lintels, as the evidence the Thai government had
17 collected confirmed that the lintels belonged to two ancient temples in Northeastern Thailand and were
18 designated as cultural artifacts protected under the laws of Thailand since 1935.

20 11. The Fine Arts Department commissioned two archaeological surveys outlining the
21 provenance of the defendant property. One survey placed one of the lintels ("LINTEL 1") at the Prasat
22 Nong Hong Temple, in Non Din Daeng District, Buriram Province, Thailand. See Ex. A. The
23 archaeologists who authored the survey indicated that LINTEL 1 was a part of the Prasat Nong Hong
24 Temple until at least 1959. The authors compared images of LINTEL 1 while it was on the Prasat Nong
25 Hong Temple and images of LINTEL 1 from the Museum. The authors concluded, based on their
26 expertise in Southeast Asian archaeology, that the images from the Museum depicted LINTEL 1.
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1 12. The second archaeological survey placed the other defendant lintel (“LINTEL 2”) at the
2 Prasat Khao Lon Temple, Ta Phraya District, Sa Kaeo Province, Thailand. See Ex. B. The
3 archaeologists who authored this survey indicated that LINTEL 2 was on the Prasat Khao Lon Temple
4 until at least 1967. The authors compared images of LINTEL 2 while it was on Prasat Khao Lon
5 Temple and images of LINTEL 2 from the Museum. The authors concluded, based on their expertise in
6 Southeast Asian archaeology, that the images from the Museum depicted LINTEL 2.

8 13. Records obtained during the course of investigating the origin of LINTELS 1 and 2
9 indicate that the defendant property had been donated to the City of San Francisco from a prolific
10 collector of Asian art and artifacts (“COLLECTOR 1”). Those same records indicate that
11 COLLECTOR 1 obtained LINTEL 1 in 1966 from an auction house and gallery located in London, UK
12 (“GALLERY 1”). The records further indicate that COLLECTOR 1 obtained LINTEL 2 from a gallery
13 located in Paris, France (“GALLERY 2”) in 1968.

15 14. The records the United States reviewed also included documents establishing both lintels’
16 provenance. With respect to LINTEL 1, the Museum had several letters that COLLECTOR 1
17 exchanged with representatives of GALLERY 1 concerning the purchase of art. Among other things,
18 one of the representatives of GALLERY 1 and COLLECTOR 1 exchanged letters concerning the
19 potential that at least one lintel that COLLECTOR 1 had purchased had been stolen from Thailand, and
20 that another artifact had been taken out of Thailand illegally. These records also included archaeological
21 surveys from Thailand, indicating that LINTEL 1 had been removed from Prasat Nong Hong temple.
22 These communications indicate that COLLECTOR 1 was on notice that at least some portion of his
23 collection had been illegally exported from Southeast Asia.

25 15. With respect to LINTEL 2, the United States reviewed letters between COLLECTOR 1
26 and representatives of GALLERY 2. Among other things, COLLECTOR 1 indicated that a Thai lintel
27 in his possession had been reported stolen by the Thai government, and that the Thai government had
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1 asked COLLECTOR 1 to return the lintel. COLLECTOR 1 sought the advice of a representative of
2 GALLERY 2 about the situation. The records included a copy of an article published in the Bangkok
3 Post. This article described LINTEL 2's presence in the United States and indicated that, according to
4 the leader of a Thai archaeological conservation group, Thai officials wanted to recover this lintel as it
5 had been improperly looted from Thailand.

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7 16. During the relevant time period, Thailand administered several cultural patrimony laws
8 designed to protect art, antiques, monuments, and artifacts that contributed to Thai historiography and
9 cultural heritage. The two Thai patrimony laws relevant to this complaint are the 1934 Act on Ancient
10 Monuments, Objects of Art, Antiquities and National Museums; and the 1961 Act on Ancient
11 Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art, and National Museums. Both laws govern whether and/or when
12 a piece of art is permitted to be exported from Thailand. In sum, both laws prohibit the removal of
13 property from Thailand that is culturally and/or historically significant except under limited
14 circumstances, none of which are applicable here. Both laws also deem cultural artifacts, like LINTELS
15 1 and 2, state property. Both laws are relevant here because, as described above, LINTEL 1 was last
16 placed at the Prasat Nong Hong Temple in 1959, meaning it came off the temple between 1959 and its
17 1966 appearance at GALLERY 1. Although the exact date of LINTEL 1's removal is unknown, its
18 removal post-dated the passage of the 1934 Act. LINTEL 2 is known to have been removed from
19 Thailand after 1961, meaning that the 1961 Act applies to LINTEL 2.

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22 17. Both laws prohibited the removal of the defendant lintels from Thailand at all times
23 relevant to this complaint. Both laws cover numerous Thai archaeological sites cross-referenced
24 through the "Government Gazette," which functions as Thailand's repository of executive regulations.
25 The Government Gazette included the archaeological sites that held both lintels, Prasat Nong Hong
26 Temple and Prasat Khao Lon Temple, and thus required that the artifacts within those sites (including
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1 LINTELS 1 and 2) not be removed from Thailand, except upon the issuance of an export license or
2 other permission to leave Thailand.

3 18. No person or entity ever sought an application for an export license or other form of
4 permission to take these lintels out of the Kingdom of Thailand prior to their removal from the country.

5 19. As goods and merchandise entering the territory of the United States from territory
6 outside the United States, LINTELS 1 and 2 are subject to customs laws, rules, and regulations,
7 including those described in Title 19 of the United States Code and the regulations promulgated
8 thereunder.

9 20. As LINTELS 1 and 2 were imported into the United States in violation of Thai law, i.e.
10 without the requisite export documents, and as LINTELS 1 and 2 were the cultural property of Thailand,
11 LINTELS 1 and 2 constitute stolen, smuggled, and/or clandestinely imported or introduced merchandise
12 pursuant to Title 19, United States Code, Section 1595a(c)(1)(A).

13 21. The United States seeks to make LINTELS 1 and 2 available for repatriation to the
14 Kingdom of Thailand upon forfeiture of all interests in LINTELS 1 and 2 to the United States, pending
15 the outcome of the Department of Justice's remission/restoration process.

16 22. Starting in 2017, and continuing through subsequent years, the United States brought the
17 issue with LINTELS 1 and 2 to the Museum's attention. Only recently, after the United States
18 attempted to negotiate with counsel for the City and County of San Francisco in good faith, the museum
19 initiated inquiries into the return of LINTELS 1 and 2 to Thailand. However, the United States' requests
20 for the City and County of San Francisco to adhere to a court-sanctioned process have not been fruitful.
21 Thus, the United States now brings the instant action to ensure the rights of the Thai government as a
22 potential claimant to LINTELS 1 & 2.
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1 **CLAIM FOR RELIEF**

2 23. The United States incorporates by reference the allegations in paragraphs 1 through 22 as
3 though fully set forth herein.

4 24. Civil forfeiture actions brought under Title 19 are exempt from the general requirements
5 of the Civil Asset Forfeiture Reform Act of 2000. See Title 18, United States Code, Section
6 983(i)(2)(A).
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8 25. The burden of proof in civil forfeiture actions brought under Title 19 requires the
9 government to prove the forfeitability of an asset by probable cause. Title 19, United States Code,
10 Section 1615.

11 26. Title 19, United States Code, Section 1595a(c)(1)(A) mandates the seizure and forfeiture
12 of merchandise if it is stolen, smuggled, or clandestinely imported or introduced; is a controlled
13 substance; is a contraband article; or is a plastic explosive as defined by law.
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15 27. At all times relevant to this complaint, the 1934 and 1961 Thai cultural property acts
16 described above forbade the unlicensed export of archaeological artifacts from specifically named
17 archeological sites, including the Prasat Nong Hong and Prasat Khao Lon Temples.

18 28. In light of the foregoing, and considering the totality of the circumstances, the defendant
19 property represents merchandize which was introduced into the United States contrary to law, as it was
20 stolen, smuggled, or clandestinely imported or introduced. The defendant property listed herein is thus
21 subject to forfeiture under Title 19, United States Code, Section 1595a(c)(1)(A).
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24 WHEREFORE, plaintiff United States of America requests that due process issue to enforce the
25 forfeiture of the above listed Defendant Property; that notice be given to all interested parties to appear
26 and show cause why forfeiture should not be decreed; that judgment of forfeiture be entered; that the
27 Court enter a judgment forfeiting the Defendant Property; and that the United States be awarded such
28 other relief as may be proper and just.

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2 DATED: October 26, 2020

Respectfully submitted,

3 DAVID L. ANDERSON
4 United States Attorney

5 _____/s/_____
6 CHRIS KALTSAS
7 AMANDA M. BETTINELLI (CDCA)
8 Assistant United States Attorneys
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1. I am a Special Agent with Homeland Security Investigations, Department of Homeland Security. I am an agent assigned to this case. As such, I am familiar with the facts and the investigation leading to the filing of this Complaint for Forfeiture.

* * * * *

[Signature]

David R. Keller
Special Agent
Homeland Security Investigations

EXHIBIT A



EXHIBIT B

