

US returns ancient artifacts from Mexico



Anthropomorphic clay figures belonging to the Teotihuacan culture are displayed at the US Embassy in Mexico City

Mexico City, Mexico

The United States returned two ancient figurines to Mexico Tuesday, seized from the home of an amateur archeologist who died in 2015 with a collection of 42,000 artifacts, many of them taken illegally.

The small clay sculptures date from the Mesoamerican classical period, around 1,300 to 1,800 years ago, archeologists said at a ceremony at the US Embassy in Mexico City, where the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) handed back the figurines.

The long, strange story of their return "started with a police investigation, and concludes today with this ceremony, in which Mexico is recovering two artifacts that are part of its cultural heritage," said Mexican foreign ministry lawyer Sergio Estrada. The artifacts were found in the US state of Indiana in the home of a collector named Don Miller, officials told journalists.

Miller, who died four years ago at age 91, spent his life traveling the world, participating in archeological digs and collecting rare artifacts, which he displayed in his basement.

But near the end of his life, the FBI -- acting on a tip -- raided his home and seized more than 7,000 of those artifacts, which appear to have been removed illegally from their countries of origin, said special agent Edward Gallant.

On US-Mexico border, militia vow to patrol until wall is up

Sunland Park, United States

In the southeasternmost pocket of the US state of New Mexico, with El Paso, Texas, to the east and Mexico a stone's throw south, there is a small camp: a few tents and a weathered trailer.

It is home to the half dozen or so members of the United Constitutional Patriots (UCP) -- a small but well-armed militia dipping their toes into the US border vigilante movement.

In recent months, thousands of migrants have arrived in Mexico, primarily Central Americans fleeing poverty and violence at home.

US President Donald Trump has described them as a threat to national security, demanding billions of dollars from Congress to build a wall on the southern border.

The resignation of Trump's Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen on Sunday, reportedly over the president's push to restart family separations at the border, has under-

scored his failure to get to grips with the issue.

And until the wall is built, the UCP insist they will be there.

"We're here to assist the border patrol because they are so short handed," the group's leader, 70-year-old "Striker," said.

"We have a good work rapport with them," he said. "Our goal was to be here until we're not needed. And when we're not needed is when that wall is up."

Based out of Flora Vista, New Mexico, the group -- made up mostly of older veterans -- enjoys an enthusiastic social media following. Striker can be heard fielding calls during lengthy radio broadcasts streamed online several times a week.

And if you want to sign up to "uphold and defend the constitution?" Just give pick up the phone.

Out in the field -- with tactical gear, rifles and even custom patches -- the UCP say their duties include watching the border, standing guard over people who want to hand themselves in to border patrol and pursuing those who don't.

'Fantasy world'

"It's kind of no different than if you were to have citizen's arrest powers, if you will," Jim Benvie, a 43-year-old from Minnesota, said.

Benvie explains that they use the term "surrender" because border patrol rules only allow them to "observe and report."

In a statement, the US Border Patrol said it "does not endorse private groups or organizations taking enforcement matters into their own hands."

And according to the Anti Defamation League's Mark Pitcavage, an expert on right-wing extremism, the UCP's bark is much bigger than its bite.

"These guys, even more than some other militia or vigilante groups, seem to be living in a fantasy world of their own," he told AFP, adding that they have been active for around two and a half years.

"They have this grandiose vision of themselves as protecting America from the drug cartels," he said.

However, he added: "It's ironic that the areas where they seem to have chosen to

focus ... is a very highly guarded stretch of border."

Pitcavage points to the rights to bear arms and assemble peaceably enshrined in the US Constitution.

"And if this is a simply a combination of those, can the government actually prohibit this seemingly constitutionally protected activity?" he said.

The border vigilante movement is well-established, with the Southern Poverty Law Center documenting "questionable apprehensions of migrants by private citizens" from as far back as 1999.

Pitcavage acknowledges that the movement is grounded in anti-immigrant sentiment but says white supremacy among followers is actually minimal -- and he sees no such elements within the UCP.

"Countries having borders is not racist," was member Jim Benvie's take.

"It's not about race. We have Latinos that work on our team with us."

A group of about 30 Brazilian migrants, who had just crossed the border, get into a US Border Patrol van, taking them off the property of Jeff Allen, who used to run a brick factory near Mt. Christo Rey on the US-Mexico border in Sunland Park, New Mexico



Facebook enhances memorialized user accounts



chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg

San Francisco, United States

Facebook on Tuesday improved features of social network accounts kept as memorials to deceased members of the online community.

Memorialized accounts are intended to serve as venues for friends and family to share memories and thoughts of those who have passed away, and are secured to prevent anyone from logging in, according to Facebook.

Updates included addition of a separate tributes section where people can share posts, while not changing the original timeline of an account.

"We know the loss of a friend or family member can be devastating -- and we want Facebook to be a place where people can support each other while honoring the memory of their loved ones," chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg said in a post.

Facebook added controls for people who manage memorialized accounts, and improved artificial intelligence to prevent profiles of people who have died from appearing in "painful ways," such as sending birthday reminders to friends, according to Sandberg. "These changes are the result of feedback we heard from people of different religions and cultural backgrounds as well as experts and academics," Sandberg said.

The real deal: astronomers deliver first photo of black hole

Paris, France

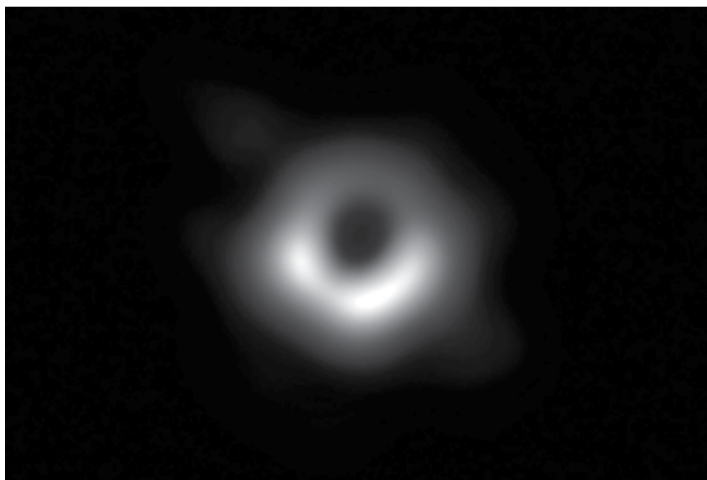
Astronomers yesterday unveiled the first photo of a black hole, one of the star-devouring monsters scattered throughout the Universe and obscured by impenetrable shields of gravity.

The image of a dark core encircled by a flame-orange halo of white-hot gas and plasma looks like any number of artists' renderings over the last 30 years.

But this time, it's the real deal. Scientists have been puzzling over invisible "dark stars" since the 18th century, but never has one been spied by a telescope, much less photographed.

The supermassive black hole now immortalised by a far-flung network of radio telescopes is 50 million lightyears away in a galaxy known as M87.

"It's a distance that we could have barely imagined," Frederic Gueth, an astronomer at France's



The first photograph of a black hole and its fiery halo, released by Event Horizon Telescope astronomers (EHT)

National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and co-author of studies detailing the findings, told AFP.

Most speculation had centred on the other candidate targeted by the Event Horizon Telescope

-- Sagittarius A*, the black hole at the centre of our own galaxy, the Milky Way.

By comparison, Sag A* is only 26,000 lightyears from Earth.

Locking down an image of M87's supermassive black hole

at such distance is comparable to photographing a pebble on the Moon.

European Space Agency astrophysicist Paul McNamara called it an "outstanding technical achievement".

It was also a team effort.

"Instead of constructing a giant telescope that would collapse under its own weight, we combined many observatories," Michael Bremer, an astronomer at the Institute for Millimetric Radio Astronomy (IRAM) in Grenoble, told AFP.

Earth in a thimble

Over several days in April 2017, eight radio telescopes in Hawaii, Arizona, Spain, Mexico, Chile, and the South Pole zeroed in on Sag A* and M87.

Knit together "like fragments of a giant mirror," in Bremer's words, they formed a virtual observatory some 12,000 kilo-

metres across -- roughly the diameter of Earth.

In the end, M87 was more photogenic. Like a fidgety child, Sag A* was too "active" to capture a clear picture, the researchers said.

"The telescope is not looking at the black hole per se, but the material it has captured," a luminous disk of white-hot gas and plasma known as an accretion disk, said McNamara, who was not part of the team.

"The light from behind the black hole gets bent like a lens."

The unprecedented image -- so often imagined in science and science fiction --- has been analysed in six studies co-authored by 200 experts from 60-odd institutions and published Wednesday in *Astrophysical Journal Letters*.

"I never thought that I would see a real one in my lifetime," said CNRS astrophysicist Jean-

Pierre Luminet, author in 1979 of the first digital simulation of a black hole.

Coined in the mid-60s by American physicist John Archibald Wheeler, the term "black hole" refers to a point in space where matter is so compressed as to create a gravity field from which even light cannot escape.

The more mass, the bigger the hole. At the same scale of compression, Earth would fit inside a thimble. The Sun would measure a mere six kilometres edge-to-edge.

A successful outcome depended in part on the vagaries of weather during the April 2017 observation period.

"For everything to work, we needed to have clear visibility at every [telescope] location worldwide", said IRAM scientist Pablo Torne, recalling collective tension, fatigue and, finally, relief.