

The Indiana Jones of art

AFP | The Hague, Netherlands

A Dutch art detective has returned two priceless stone reliefs stolen from an ancient Spanish church after tracing them to an English nobleman's garden where they were displayed as ornaments.

Arthur Brand, dubbed the "Indiana Jones of the art world", said he handed over the centuries-old carvings to the Spanish embassy in London at a private ceremony on Monday.

It was the culmination of a long search for the artworks, which were snatched in 2004 from the Santa Maria de Lara church in northern Spain, believed to be at least 1,000 years old.

They turned up in the garden of an aristocratic British

family who had unwittingly bought them, and it was there that Brand found them covered in mud and leaves.

"These artworks are priceless. To find them in a garden after searching for eight years is just incredible," the art sleuth said.

"You can imagine how horrified they were to learn that their garden ornaments were in fact priceless stolen Spanish religious art."

The private investigator showed the stone carvings -- one of which depicts John the Evangelist, author of one of the Gospels -- hours before they were handed back.

The reliefs, said to weigh 50 kilos (110 pounds) each, were then handed to representatives

of Spain's Guardia Civil police force, who are collaborating in the case, and two museum curators from the northern city of Burgos.

The Spanish embassy in London declined to comment.

'World heritage

The hunt for the artworks could come straight from a detective novel.

The church from which they were stolen is believed to date from the era of the Visigoths, with experts dating it between the seventh and eleventh centuries.

But in a huge blow the reliefs were snatched by professional art thieves in 2004, Brand said.

In 2010 the intrepid sleuth first received word from an un-

named British informant that "something strange" had popped up in London, which eventually pointed him to a shadowy man Brand referred to as 'Mr X'.

"It turns out 'Mr X' saw a French dealer arriving with the reliefs by truck in London. They were put on offer as garden ornaments -- but Mr X recognised them as possible Visigoth religious artworks," Brand said.

"The guys who stole these wanted to sell it for a couple of millions or whatever, but they have soon find out that you can not sell these, so to make at least a little bit of money, they sold them as garden ornaments," he said, adding that they were probably sold for around 50,000 pounds each.

Brand then tracked down the French dealer, who pointed them towards an unnamed British aristocratic family living north of London.

"It ended up in the garden of an English nobleman, who did not know that it was world heritage, where they would stay like 15 years," he said.

The owners were so shocked when told the truth that "they wanted to throw the artworks into a river and let them disappear forever. Fortunately we managed to convince them not to," said Brand.

It was yet another success for Brand, who was in the headlines last year for returning a stolen 1,600-year-old mosaic to Cyprus that was found in the possession of a similarly unwitting British family.

He won world fame in

Two priceless stone reliefs stolen from a mysterious ancient Spanish church in 2004 were handed back after they were traced to an English garden where they were displayed as ornaments. Dubbed the "Indiana Jones of the art world" because of his exploits, Dutch art detective Arthur Brand said he handed the carvings back to the Spanish embassy at a private ceremony in London.

2015 after finding "Hitler's Horses", two bronze statues made by Nazi sculptor Joseph Thorak.

'Worthy of Dan Brown'

The recovery of the artworks could also play an important role in revealing more about the mysterious Santa Maria de Lara church near Burgos.

The church was effectively lost for centuries before being rediscovered in 1921 by a local priest and declared a national monument in 1929.

Inside, the church has Christian, but also pagan, Roman symbols and Islamic influences -- "worthy of a Dan Brown novel," Brand quipped.

The stone reliefs "are of huge value," said Rene Payo, art history professor at the University of Burgos.

"They are important because not many exist today. There are very little... quantities of Visigoth figurative sculptures," he told AFP.

The Visigoths settled in Spain between the fifth and eighth century after driving out the Romans, but were themselves overthrown by the Moors in 711.

The looted artworks could also be "essential" evidence in a debate raging among scholars about the exact age of the church, said Oxford University researcher David Addison.

Addison said some believed it was a 7th century building while others dated it to the 10th or 11th centuries.

Brand's return of the artifacts "would be a great service in this regard," Addison said.



Dutch art detective Arthur Brand (L) and an assistant position two 7th century limestone Visigoth reliefs on the ground in north London on January 20, 2019, the reliefs, depicting evangelists, where both stolen from the Maria del Lara Church in Spain.



Dutch art detective Arthur Brand poses for a photograph

Foreigners gather at India's religious mega festival

Allahabad, India

At the Kumbh Mela, the world's biggest religious event, millions of Indian Hindus are not the only people bathing in the sacred waters to wash away their sins.

Foreigners too are among the ascetics, saints, sadhus and spectators thronging the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers in northern India for what is billed as humanity's biggest gathering.

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati grew up in a Jewish family in California but moved in 1996 to an ashram in Rishikesh -- the town made famous internationally when the Beatles visited in 1968 -- and changed her life and

her name.

"I was on holiday with a backpack and when I got to Rishikesh, on the banks of the sacred Ganges, I had a very very deep, very very powerful spiritual awakening experience which made me realise where I need to be, where I need to spend my life," she said.

The 47-year-old is among the worshippers taking a dip at the Kumbh, which is expected to attract well over 100 million people over the next seven weeks.

"The reason we take a bath in the sacred waters is to achieve immortality... immortality of the soul," she said.

"It felt amazing, it always feels amazing... Normally only the body gets wet but here you ac-

tually feel like your inner self is getting wet, your heart, your soul is getting wet, your spirit... The depth of my being is being touched."

A record 22.5 million people plunged into the waters on the first day of the Kumbh last Tuesday, according to local officials.

Westerners who have immersed themselves in Hindu spirituality include Baba Rampuri, who claims to be the first foreigner to be initiated into India's largest and most ancient order of yogis, the Naga Sannyasis of Juna Akhara.

The surgeon's son -- reportedly born William A. Gans -- grew up in Beverly Hills and moved to India in 1970, and like Saras-

wati is active on Facebook and Twitter.

"I am not a great believer in modern technology, or the consumerist messages being sent out through the medium, but we have to make people aware that we exist," he told the Indian Express.

Another is Sir James Mallinson, the dreadlocked fifth baronet of Walthamstow and British academic ordained as a mahant, or Hindu priest, in 2013. He also runs a paragliding firm in the Himalayas.

Many of the foreigners at the Kumbh are simple tourists though, keen to see the ash-smearing, pipe-smoking Naga sadhus, naked except for beads and flower garlands.



International followers of the Indian spiritual guru Chidanand Saraswati perform Hindu rituals on the banks of the holy Sangam -- the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers -- at the Kumbh Mela festival in Allahabad.