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### News Releases

March 10, 2010 A button labeled "SHARE" with a red plus icon and social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

## **U.S. returns ancient sarcophagus to Egypt at National Geographic Society *3,000-year-old antiquity was found at Miami airport and traced to Spanish gallery***

WASHINGTON - In a ceremony at the National Geographic Society, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) returned an ancient sarcophagus to the Arab Republic of Egypt and its Embassy. The colorful artifact, devoid of its original contents, was detained by CBP during routine inspections of goods coming into the United States and turned over to ICE, which investigated its path through the international art world. The item was eventually seized for return to Egypt.

The National Geographic Society, which has a long partnership with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and its Secretary General Dr. Zahi Hawass, hosted the official repatriation of the item to Egypt by Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for ICE John Morton and CPB Assistant Commissioner Allen Gina.

"There is nothing new about the theft and trafficking of cultural artifacts. Sadly, these practices that are older than this sarcophagus," said ICE Assistant Secretary Morton. "But our 21st-Century global cooperation among law enforcement, museums, academics and organizations such as National Geographic Society, make it far more risky for those who would profit from selling stolen cultural property."

"Through the facilitation and enforcement of U.S. trade laws, this artifact will provide the Egyptian people a key to their past," said CBP Assistant Commissioner Gina. "Customs and Border Protection is pleased to work in partnership with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to enforce U.S. customs law and to return priceless artifacts to their lawful owner."

"A piece of our history that left Egypt under mysterious circumstances has found its way home with the help of our partners in the U.S. government," said Dr. Hawass, Secretary General, Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. "Since I took office eight years ago, the U.S. has assisted in the repatriation of many stolen artifacts to Egypt. We welcome the return of this beautiful wooden sarcophagus and look forward to learning more about its history."

The coffin was intercepted by CBP at Miami International Airport in 2008 and initially scrutinized for agricultural concerns. An agriculture specialist, concerned that the coffin would require a permit, referred it

to the Trade Enforcement Team and ICE. CBP and ICE contacted the importer to establish whether the coffin had been exported legally from Egypt. ICE tracked the sale of the sarcophagus to a U.S. citizen, who was neither an art dealer nor broker. He claimed to have sold it already to a Canadian. Neither the importer nor the Spanish Gallery that exported it could establish its legal export from Egypt or when or how it would have left Egypt. Given the absence of a credible provenance, the item was determined to be owned by Egypt through its Cultural Patrimony Laws. The item was seized as imported stolen property. ICE worked through its attaché offices in Egypt and Spain to provide the information that led to the forfeiture of the property.

The U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, CBP and ICE Miami were able to successfully counter a legal challenge by the Spanish art gallery that had sold the sarcophagus. The challenge was later abandoned before it could go to trial.

As the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security, ICE plays a leading role in investigating crimes involving the illicit importation and distribution of cultural property, art and antiquities. ICE's Cultural Property Art and Antiquities unit and Office of International Affairs work jointly to identify, investigate and eventually return art and cultural items to their countries of origin or rightful owners.

ICE uses investigative authority to seize cultural property, art and antiquities if they were illegally imported into the United States. It also investigates the illegal trafficking of artwork, especially works that have been reported lost or stolen. ICE's Office of International Affairs, through its 63 attaché offices worldwide, works closely with foreign governments to conduct joint investigations.

CBP is the unified border agency within DHS charged with the management, control and protection of U.S. borders at and between official ports of entry. ICE investigates cultural artifacts that appear to have been imported illegally and often show up for sale in the U.S. market.

For photos of the artifact, visit the [ICE Image Gallery](http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/gallery/) (<http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/gallery/>) or [www.cbp.gov](http://www.cbp.gov). For additional information on ICE repatriations, check out the [Cultural Heritage Investigations page](http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/cultural-artifacts-repatriation.htm) (<http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/cultural-artifacts-repatriation.htm>).

-- ICE --

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

ICE comprises four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities. For more information, visit [www.ICE.gov](http://www.ICE.gov). To report suspicious activity, call 1-866-347-2423.

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