



United States  
House of Representatives

May 11, 2023

The Honorable Merrick B. Garland  
Attorney General  
United States Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Garland,

On August 18, 2022, *The New York Times* published an article which outlined a dispute between Cambodian officials and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the “Met”) regarding the origins of 13 items in the Met’s extensive collection.<sup>1</sup> The article explained that Cambodian officials “enlisted the help of the U.S. Justice Department” (“DOJ”) in hopes of returning these artifacts to Cambodia. Fortunately, the Met appeared to be conducting its own internal investigation to determine the true provenance of the art.

In response to this article, I sent a letter to the Met on November 18, 2022, requesting an update on their internal investigation as well as commitments to both work with DOJ and to return the artifacts to the people of Cambodia should the investigation demonstrate that they were stolen. Unfortunately, in its response, the Met only committed continue working with DOJ but provided none of the additional information requested.<sup>2</sup> This response was inadequate, especially because I have heard from Cambodian Americans in the communities I represent who expressed concern that the Met is potentially holding stolen Cambodian artwork. These constituents are understandably eager to see this issue resolved.

I greatly appreciate the work DOJ has previously undertaken to address allegations of theft of Cambodian artwork. Shortly before the August 18 article in *The New York Times*, DOJ announced the return of 30 looted artifacts to Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Southern District of New York, concluded that Douglas Latchford had sold these stolen artifacts to private collectors and the Denver Art Museum. In February 2023, 77 gold relics from Douglas Latchford’s collection,

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Mashberg and Graham Bowley, *Cambodia Says It’s Found Its Lost Artifacts: In Gallery 249 at the Met*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 18, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/arts/design/met-artifacts-cambodia.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The Met’s response stated, “After Mr. Latchford was indicted in 2019, The Met proactively reached out to the U.S. Attorney’s office and has been—and will continue to be—responsive and cooperative with the federal authorities.” Letter from Daniel Weiss, President and Chief Executive Officer, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to Congresswoman Lori Trahan (Dec. 16, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Press Release, Department of Justice: U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of New York, *U.S. Attorney Announces Return Of 30 Looted Antiquities To Kingdom Of Cambodia* (Aug. 8, 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-attorney-announces-return-30-looted-antiquities-kingdom-cambodia>.

which officials believe were previously looted, were returned to the people of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, possessing artifacts that Mr. Latchford handled has become dubious at best. The 13 artifacts now in question at the Met were also sold by Mr. Latchford, who was charged in 2019 with wire fraud conspiracy and other crimes related to illegally selling stolen antiquities from Cambodia. As you know, Mr. Latchford died before DOJ concluded the case, so the indictment was dismissed. Nevertheless, it is critical that the Met quickly determine whether any of the Cambodian artifacts it obtained from Mr. Latchford were stolen from the people of Cambodia.

I ask that you continue investigating this important issue. Should your investigation conclude that the Met possesses stolen artifacts, I anticipate that you will do everything possible to ensure they are returned to the people of Cambodia.

Sincerely,



Lori Trahan  
Member of Congress

CC. United States Attorney of the Southern District of New York

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Mashberg, *Cambodia Says It Has Recovered Looted Gold Jewelry Once Worn by Royals*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 20, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/20/arts/cambodia-gold-jewelry-royals-latchford.html>.