

'Cradle of Civilization' Treasures Lost in Iraq War

Last Updated: 15 Apr 2003 15:07 BST



By Rosalind Russell

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Iraq's heritage has been stolen. Ancient and priceless artifacts documenting the development of mankind are missing, rare manuscripts set alight and artwork snatched.

Baghdad's museums, galleries and libraries are empty shells, looted and torched almost overnight by gangs operating in the security vacuum which accompanied last week's invasion of the city by U.S. forces and the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Iraq sits on the land of ancient Mesopotamia, the "land between two rivers," home to prehistoric man and the cradle of civilization. On the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, the Mesopotamians were the first people to study the stars, develop the written word and enforce a legal code. Standing among shards of glass outside the Iraqi National Museum, Dr. Moayad Damerji said the objects and artifacts which bore witness to mankind's development had vanished, their loss immeasurable.

"The Iraqi National Museum is the only museum in the world which shows all the steps in the history of mankind," said the professor of archaeology at Baghdad University, and the former director general of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities.

"These witnesses to our own development have gone, they are gone."

Among the most priceless treasures missing are the Vase of Uruk and the Harp of Ur, dating back to between 3,000 and 2,500 BC and the rule of the Sumerian kings. The exquisite bronze Statue of Basitki from the Akkadian kingdom is also gone, somehow hauled out of the museum despite its huge weight.

"SAVAGE AND FURIOUS"

"They were savage and furious in their deeds," Damerji said of the looters, who operated under the cover of fighting between U.S. troops and Saddam Fedayeen militia in the western quarter of Baghdad where the museum stands.

"They used iron bars and different kinds of tools to go through the doors. They went through every single room, every place. They took what they could and broke down the rest into pieces to show that they were here."

The heads of stone statues have been decapitated, precious inscribed

tablets from the great Sumerian libraries lost. But the full extent of the damage is still not known. With no electricity, museum workers are keeping their movements inside the building to a minimum for fear of disturbing what remains.

Nearby at the Saddam Arts Center there is a similar story of destruction and despair. Picking through lumps of plaster, glass and discarded picture frames scattered the floor, Iraqi artist Moayad al-Haidari is searching for his paintings.

"My work was here. Before the war my work was here," he said, gazing at the empty white walls of the exhibition space on the ground floor. "We painted our dreams, our ideas, our future. It's a complete disaster."

On the upper floors of the post-modern concrete gallery the permanent exhibition of the works of the Iraqi Pioneers, a group of early 20th-century painters and sculptors who laid the foundation for the modern Iraqi art movement have simply disappeared.

"This has been organized. It is not just theft, the aim is bigger than this," said Haidari, dressed neatly and almost in tears. "This is to undermine us, our heritage, our identity, our pride."

LIBRARY SMOULDERING

Other Iraqis share his sentiment. Tareq Abdulrazak, a 63-year-old scientist, on Tuesday stood outside the charred and smoldering shell of Iraq's national library, opposite the defense ministry in Baghdad. Yellow catalog cards fluttered in the breeze on the library steps, inside the air was still warm and the floor covered in flimsy black pieces of charred paper. Every book, every manuscript has been destroyed.

"Here was Iraq's culture. Ancient and modern, all in writing," said Abdulrazak. The Americans watched this happen. It is not enough to destroy our buildings, our people? Now our history too?"

The widespread looting that followed the capture of the Iraqi capital has invoked fury among Baghdadis, who say U.S. forces did little to protect their shops, businesses and public buildings after the collapse of Iraqi authority.

Moayad Damerji of the Iraqi National Museum said the raid on the building was planned in advance by people who knew exactly what they were looking for among artifacts mainly unearthed during excavations between the First and Second World Wars.

"This was a program, well organized. The Americans protected the oilfields, but did nothing to protect our museum, but they are obliged to protect these sites," he said.

INTERNATIONAL HELP

"Now everything is gone. Eighty years of work is gone. It is too late."

In London on Tuesday, the British Museum announced it was sending nine conservation experts to Iraq to help restore its cultural heritage.

Britain's Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell also stressed the importance of preventing an illegal market developing in stolen goods and called for a declaration that would see them returned to Iraq.

"We have to kill the market in stolen Iraqi treasures," Jowell said. "We are determined to make sure that the U.K. is not a market for stolen Iraqi imports."

UNESCO deputy director Mounir Bouchenaki said leading archeologists will meet in Paris on Thursday to seek ways to rescue Iraq's cultural heritage. They also plan a fact-finding mission to Iraq.

© Copyright Reuters 2002. All rights reserved. Any copying, re-publication or re-distribution of Reuters content or of any content used on this site, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without prior written consent of Reuters.

Quotes and other data are provided for your personal information only, and are not intended for trading purposes. Reuters, the members of its Group and its data providers shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the quotes or other data, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon.

© Reuters 2002. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

REUTERS 