

# **A CALL FOR HELP FROM THE FBI! LESSONS LEARNED FROM FBI CASE OF ILLEGAL COLLECTION OF ANCIENT ARTIFACTS AND HUMAN REMAINS**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

On 27 Feb 2019, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a [public statement](#) about an investigation into Don Miller, a collector who acquired 42,000 artifacts from around the world and was accused of looting or buying illegal antiquities, as well as skeletons from about 500 Native American individuals. In 2014, with Miller's cooperation, the FBI removed 7,000 illegally obtained artifacts worldwide plus the human remains from his home. Since then, the FBI has been trying to [repatriate these antiquities](#) to their nations of origin, as well as send the remains to the appropriate tribes for reburial. Meanwhile, the FBI is responsible for proper curation and preservation of the items. Miller died in 2015; no one else has been identified as responsible for the crimes so far.

**The FBI is making this case public in the hope that more countries and tribes will contact the FBI to help identify and repatriate the artifacts from the Miller case. An invitation-only database of all items has been made available to experts to use in identification of items. If any CHAMP or MilCHAG members are interested in helping the FBI, please send an email to [artifacts@fbi.gov](mailto:artifacts@fbi.gov).**

**This is the type of situation in which the academic and professional archaeologist members in MilCHAG and CHAMP can make a huge difference! Members have expertise in many different professions and cultures, with the potential to answer questions and assess artifacts for law enforcement. If you do become involved in this case, please consider sharing your experience with your fellow members! Just send your information to Laura Childs to forward to the groups.**

Several Lessons Learned can be derived from this case that provide much thoughtful consideration about protecting and preserving cultural property and human remains while respecting the needs and sensitivities of the local peoples. Everyone interested in the topic of protection of cultural property can find helpful information regarding the type of people who collect and loot; the conditions under which they collect; the role of government officials, law enforcement and military personnel; and how to properly recover and repatriate artifacts. A brief outline of these lessons is offered to CHAMP and MilCHAG members as an example that can be used for educational and training purposes for military personnel, law enforcement, museum curators, and government leaders at international, national, state, and local levels.

**LESSONS LEARNED:**

**Collectors can be obsessively driven to obtain ancient artifacts and human remains, often by illegal means.** Don Miller, a scientist and avid amateur archaeologist, obsessively collected artifacts worldwide, from many eras and peoples, for decades. Many artifacts were obtained illegally, especially the human remains. This behavior is typical of obsessed collectors; people who typically like to show their collections or brag about them. When large sums of money are involved, customs officials and financial institutions are alerted. In this case, the FBI Art Crimes Team was tipped off by someone concerned about the human remains. Law enforcement needs to become more aware of the existence of such collectors and their habits. Mr. Miller gave frequent tours of much of his collection, minus the human remains. Law enforcement personnel could have visited routinely and surveyed the collection.

In addition, the type and age of collectibles can provide clues to looters and middlemen engaged in selling collections to wealthy collectors, as well as the sites from which such artifacts are looted. Monitoring such sites and people is usually routine for law enforcement personnel but it must also become routine for military personnel when they operate around such sites. Military and law enforcement (local, national, and international) need to establish and maintain good communications and share information about looters, middlemen, and collectors.

**Government officials can also derive lessons about the need to regulate the surveillance of collectors, the inspection of collections, and the careful documentation of collections.** Laws and policy governing these activities are not always as strong and detailed as they need to be. Governments should review and reassess those existing laws and policy and make appropriate changes. Such scrutiny of collectors and their collections requires funds and more personnel to become effective, but they could prevent a lot of the problems seen in this case.

**This case provides an example of how law enforcement can gain valuable information that can assist in their investigation, and their handling of the consequences, of looting and grave robbing through knowledge of cultural sensitivities of people (Native American, in this instance) living in proximity to archaeological sites and cultural property.** In the US, the [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#) (NAGRA) prohibits the looting of Native American graves and mandates that they be returned to their tribes. The FBI is currently working with all Native American tribes to identify the human remains in the Miller case and return them to their tribes. Showing great respect and sensitivity to Native American beliefs is the key to success in this enterprise. Military and law enforcement personnel can learn a great deal from this example about how to work with local peoples concerning their cultural heritage. Respect and sensitivity for local peoples will help prevent tensions and maintain good relations between authorities and the people. Therefore, this is essential to maintaining peace and order in areas of conflict.

**Identifying and establishing a relationship with all stakeholders concerned with protecting cultural property and heritage is essential to the successful handling of the legal**

**requirements and cultural sensitivities of all involved.** For instance, Miller had collected a huge number of Native American artifacts and human remains from many tribes. Therefore, the FBI had to contact all 600 tribes to ensure that all potential stakeholders could be involved. Similarly, the FBI invited the UN member nations to provide experts to help repatriate artifacts. Professional experts in the protection and curation of artifacts were recruited to deal with the immense quantity and types of antiquities. In similar circumstances, military and law enforcement personnel need to be made aware of the priority of notifying all possible stakeholders of the parties involved, artifacts, and other findings as soon as possible to adequately protect both people and artifacts. Consequently, prosecution of the laws concerning cultural property while keeping the peace will be easier and less tense for all concerned. Personnel in all government and non-government agencies of all nations involved, police, military units, universities, museums, and representatives of local people should maintain similar lists of contacts. Routine liaison between all contacts should be instituted to review information about any issues regarding cultural sensitivities, cultural property protection, and other related problems. If possible, all involved should institute regular educational and training opportunities with each other to heighten situational awareness and smoothly and efficiently handle problems.

**For large collections of artifacts and/or human remains, no one agency can adequately preserve and repatriate them.** The FBI Art Crime Team's handling of the Miller collection has been exemplary in its care for the preservation and curation of artifacts. Careful attention has been given to storing them in climate-controlled conditions and to their proper packing and shipping. However, the Art Crime Team has neither the number of trained people nor the time and equipment required to curate and identify over 7,000 artifacts. The FBI is working with Dr. Holly Cusack-McVeigh of Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis (IUPUI) to identify, curate, and ship the artifacts. Her graduate students in anthropology and museum studies work under her guidance, gaining priceless experience and knowledge about a huge variety of items. The FBI also appealed to the UN to notify countries about the looted items and requested expert help from all nations in identifying those items. The lesson that law enforcement and military personnel can take from this example is that sharing information among cultural and museum experts and government leaders provides the best chance of finding, identifying, and repatriating stolen artifacts. There are a wealth of experts and information available about cultural artifacts and property; military and law enforcement personnel are not alone in their efforts to protect cultural heritage.

### **SUMMARY:**

The Miller case is a cautionary tale of curiosity and exploration become obsession; of the acquisition of artifacts and human remains becoming personnel possessions rather than cultural history; of the efforts of so many agencies and individuals devoted to correcting the wrongs inflicted on so many cultures. Military and law enforcement personnel have much to learn from the enormity of the Miller collection, its illegally acquired artifacts and human remains, and their subsequent careful handling. The case can be used to create training scenarios and exercises for law enforcement and military personnel who routinely work with local people in culturally

sensitive situations. Civilian academic and professional experts in archaeology, anthropology, and museum curation can also use lessons learned from this case in working with law enforcement, working with culturally sensitive artifacts and human remains, and in preserving and curating those artifacts. Similarly, legal and government officials can use the case as an educational situation and an opportunity for careful study of existing laws and policies about collecting, looting, grave robbing, and proper curation of artifacts.

This case is far from being finished; stay tuned for more interesting information about it and subsequent lessons!