

Ceremonial war shield returned to Acoma Pueblo

Written by Staff Reports

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Discovered at auction in Paris, France

The Eve Auction House in Paris, France surrendered the “BOUCLIER DE GUERRE PUEBLO PROBABLEMENT ACOMA OU JEMEZ XIX SIÈCLE OU PLUS ANCIEN CUIR.” (Shield of war pueblo probably Acoma or Jemez XIX century or more old leather), to a Special Agent of the FBI’s Art Crime Team on Nov. 12.

But that all happened after this sacred item with historical, traditional, cultural and ongoing religious importance to the people of the Pueblo of Acoma, was spotted by an expert in American Indian artifacts as part of Lot #68 in the auction house.

In the course of the FBI’s investigation, tribal leaders showed pictures of the Ceremonial Shield that was being offered for sale to an enrolled member of the Pueblo of Acoma. The tribal member identified the photographs as depicting the exact Shield her grandfather had used in cultural and religious ceremonies for the Pueblo. Her grandfather had held the position of traditional kiva leader and cultural practitioner with the Pueblo. As such, he was the caretaker of this Ceremonial Shield, which was kept in the family home atop the mesa known as Sky City, within the exterior boundaries of the Pueblo of Acoma.

On July 20, 2016, the U.S. filed a civil complaint seeking forfeiture of the Acoma Shield from the auction house. The complaint alleged that on May 27, 2016, the FBI in Albuquerque, N.M., learned that Eve had scheduled an auction which included the shield for May 30, 2016 in Paris.

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This lawsuit marks the first time the U. S. filed an action to forfeit an item of cultural patrimony from any European auction house.

Under Pueblo of Acoma law, the Shield cannot be destroyed, alienated outside of the Pueblo, appropriated by someone outside of the Pueblo, or conveyed by any individual outside of the Pueblo.

The Department of Justice's Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section, the Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs, and the Department of Justice's Attaché at the Embassy worked diligently with French officials to ensure that Eve released the Shield to the custody of the United States.

On July 16, the United States, the Pueblo of Acoma, and the consignor of the Shield, Jerold Collings, entered into a settlement agreement to facilitate the Shield's return to its home at the Pueblo of Acoma. In the agreement, the parties stipulated to the delivery of the Shield to the custody of a federal law enforcement agent at the U.S. Embassy in Paris, France. Following the delivery of the Shield, an agent will transport the Shield to the evidence room at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Albuquerque. After the Shield arrives in Albuquerque, the United States will move for dismissal of the forfeiture case and release the Shield to the Pueblo of Acoma.

"The pursuit of this case demonstrates the U. S.' commitment to protect and preserve sacred Native American items for the benefit of their rightful Native American owners," said John C. Anderson, U.S. Attorney for the District of New Mexico. "This case also serves to put merchants, traders, and collectors on notice that they have a duty to know the nature and origin of the items in which they deal, so that they are not unwittingly trafficking or possessing precious items of Native American cultural patrimony."

"The sale of Native American cultural and religious items in Europe and around the world have generated millions of dollars," James C. Langenberg, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Albuquerque Division, said. "We will continue to work to prevent these sales and seek repatriation of invaluable cultural items to their Native American homes."

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The Department of Justice thanks its French partners for their assistance in this matter.