

THE HINDU

» TODAY'S PAPER » METRO PLUS

August 3, 2016

Picture this, copy that

[RANJANI GOVIND](#)

Lack of proper documentation of antiquities has resulted in fakes flooding the international market



Classic case Ravi Varma's oeuvre has often been duplicated Photo: M. Periasamy

From coins, sculptures and paintings to collectibles in stone, brass, bronze and wood, the world of artefacts mirrors a civilization, history and culture. This has been the main line of thought expressed at various museum and archaeology-related gatherings where art historians, museum and art collectors, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) officials and experts have shared their concern about the theft of artefacts.

The problems are not restricted to pilferage alone. What has muddied the waters further is the copies flooding the international market. These fake antiques and photocopies of paintings are sold for astronomical prices at international auctions.

"This creates confusion in identifying the originals," said Dr. R. Nagaswamy, former Director of Archaeology, Tamil Nadu. "The fact that temple monuments and idols are not included in the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act is aiding illegal trafficking. A national-level committee should look into this anomaly."

The ASI held a Regional Workshop on Prevention of Illicit Trafficking of Indian Cultural Wealth in Bengaluru recently. "After Tamil Nadu, Karnataka owing to its rich dynasties and sculptural history, has the highest idol theft cases," says Dr. Arun Raj T., Superintendent Archaeologist, ASI, Bangalore Circle. "The State therefore needs to bring in a Special Idol Policing Unit on the lines of the Idol Wing of Tamil Nadu and an Artefacts Registry that helps when an FIR is filed. Even the police department admits that they are unable to concentrate on idol theft cases where documented identification is never available." A senior official in the State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB) said no separate data was maintained for artefact thefts, cases were registered only under Section 378 and 379 of Indian Penal Code, with theft of any other article.

"There are an abnormally higher number of unprotected ASI sites in Karnataka where theft cases are reported regularly," said Dr. A. Subramanyeshwara Rao, DIG, CBI Bengaluru, speaking at the workshop. "Police are naturally the first responders, but how far they are informed and aided in their probe is the question. Nabbing culprits is one part. It is equally important to make the police aware of the antiquity of the artefacts, the value attached to it and the modus operandi involved, which would help the police have a better hold on these cases," he added.

Pictures of fakes in stone that have been officially declared as imitations were shown at the seminar. The Chicago Museum of Art displays a Thirthankara in stone said to be a genuine 12th Century piece of the Jain dynasty.

There are stone splendours of Belur with hardly any Hoysala styling, according to S.V. Padigar, former Professor of Indian History, Karnataka University, Dharwad. "All these come under sculpture duplication," he said underlining the need for detailed documentation of the originals of temple sculptures.

Danger of exposure

The status of metal artefacts is also worrying. "There are cases where stolen metal artefacts are melted down for the value of metal or even to destroy evidence of the artefact and theft when there is a danger of exposure," says Sharada Srinivasan, Professor, School of Humanities, NIAS. The professor has a doctorate in archaeo- metallurgy which tracks the transience of metal, from the fact that it can be melted down to be re-cast and re-shaped, obliterating the record of its previous avatar, she says.

South Indian artisans survive by re-cycling old metal artefacts because they cannot afford the cost of fresh metal. "Another aspect that needs documentation is these artefacts could go on to become antiquities in another 100-200 years. So the museums of ethnographic artefacts have to house them," says Sharada.

With the huge costs for artefacts and lack of access to them, the market for faking originals is thriving, said Dr. R. Gopal, Director, Archaeology and Museums, Venkatappa Art Gallery. "Metal sculptures are etched, defaced, soaked in salt water to rust or even buried in soil for that antique look. They are sold and smuggled out as antiques," he explained.

Fakes in paintings

The miniature art of Deccani, Pahadi or Rajasthani found in ample measure at the London Museum also have fakes all over the globe. "We need documentation of the originals to avoid this," according to Dr. R.H. Kulkarni, art expert of Chitrakala Parishath.

"Take the classic originals and the much-affordable oleographs that Ravi Varma himself created. Or M.F. Husain, who signed in English, Hindi and Urdu, that helps the fakes thrive," observes Dr. Kulkarni. The last 10 paintings of Ravi Varma, left for his son and brother to complete after his death in 1906, also brought in signatures that resembled the master's signature that created confusion. "The classic case of mis-identification is the painting of "The Lady with a Lamp" credited to Ravi Varma, when in actuality it is of Haldankar of the J.J. School of Art," says Dr. Kulkarni.

Karnataka has nearly 25,000 unprotected monuments, so thefts are relatively high

Arun Raj T

Superintendent Archaeologist, ASI-Bangalore Circle

In the absence of official studies, there is an estimated 70,000 artefacts missing in India, amongst which about 8 to 10 per cent is from Karnataka

Seshadri Shankar

India Pride Project, volunteer group working towards bringing back stolen artefacts