

To: Cultural Property Advisory Committee

From: Karen Olsen Bruhns, archaeologist working in El Salvador since 1975

Re: Renewal of MOU with El Salvador

I strongly support the renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Certain Categories of Archaeological Material from Pre-Hispanic Cultures of the Republic of El Salvador.

El Salvador was the first Central American republic to gain some degree of protection from the burgeoning US market in looted archaeological materials in 1987, when the looting of the prehispanic site of Cara Sucia became an international scandal (not coincidentally some 80-90% of the looted Cara Sucia materials, by my best estimate, decorates US museum and private collections). This agreement has been extended, amended and enlarged and became a Memorandum of understanding in 1995. The MOU is currently up for renewal and it is essential, not just for the sake of El Salvador's cultural heritage, but for that of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and, very likely Nicaragua and Costa Rica, that this MOU be renewed.

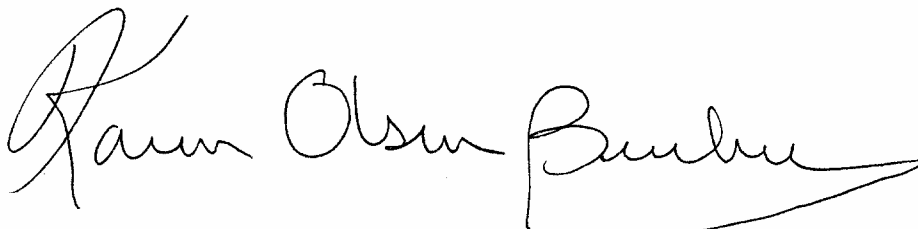
It is true that the government of El Salvador has not moved as swiftly as it might to enforce registration of national (private) collections and to prosecute looters and traffickers in antiquities. In part this has been because internal social and economic problems needing consistent attention, in part because it is very much the case that the laws pertaining to the protection of the cultural patrimony need to be entirely rewritten. With the establishment of a Secretary of Culture instead of a mere Committee, we hope that this need will be promoted and brought to the legislative attention. Valiant attempts are being made in the fields of education, site protection, and publicity of the need for the preservation of the Prehispanic (and Colonial) heritage and progress in the direction of reformation of cultural heritage laws is being made. As a parenthesis, it is noteworthy that El Salvador has had national laws prohibiting the export of archaeological pieces since 1903, one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Central American republics to recognize the necessity for such legal protection.

Today, more than ever, it is important to help El Salvador protect its archaeological heritage. Despite increased enforcement of anti-looting and anti-trafficking laws and agreements in the Americas in general, the US market for illicitly obtained antiquities is growing apace. Prices are going up as access to looted materials becomes more limited. With regards to Salvadoran antiquities, prices in the US market have gone from a few hundred dollars to many thousands. Galleries such as Barakat in Beverley Hills, California or Arte Xibalba or any one of a dozen antiquities business who parade their goods on line, have at their disposal very large collections of materials. One doubts that all this material has been in the United States since 1987. Prices on archaeological styles such as Copador, Salua, and Campana polychrome ceramics have increased enormously in the past 2 years, suggesting that the demand for such materials has also grown.

Of even more concern is the simple fact that, should El Salvador not have an MOU with the United States, it is certain that US based traffickers, smugglers, thieves, and antiquities galleries/museum personnel would begin to funnel materials from the other countries with attractive archaeological remains, especially the Maya culture areas of Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Mexico, through El Salvador. Identification labels in antiquities galleries seldom state the true provenance of a piece, but I would predict that there would be a several thousand percent increase in the number of pieces said to have been "legally" exported from El Salvador. The heritage of many countries would be increasingly threatened were El Salvador not to have an MOU with the United States.

For these reasons I most strongly support the renewal of the MOU.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Olsen Bruhns". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends across the width of the signature.

Karen Olsen Bruhns
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