

The Scream' - hauled away from Munch Museum

The Scream' and 'Madonna', famous paintings of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, were yanked from the Munch museum in Oslo on August, 2004. Two gunmen threatened the museum staff with a handgun, while dozens of horrified museum-goers watched, stunned as the armed men carried the paintings to a waiting getaway car. Many visitors panicked, thinking they were being attacked by terrorists.

As they drove through the city, the thieves broke the frames of the paintings, and threw out the bits from the window of the car, in case tracking devices were lodged in the wood.

This is not the first time The Scream went missing. In February 1994, it was stolen from the museum, and recovered by police almost three months later, undamaged in a hotel in Asgardstrand, about 65km south of the capital, Oslo. The police arrested three Norwegians for the theft. The trio had demanded from the government a US\$1 million ransom for the work of art, but a deal was not made, investigators said.

The Scream, which was created on fragile paper in 1893, evokes a terrified human figure with hands to the head, in an apparent panic under a tumultuous blood-red sky. It makes reference to the horrors of the Holocaust, nuclear explosions and a world of fear. It has been estimated that if auctioned legitimately, The Scream would be worth about US\$70 million.

The Madonna is a painting of a mysterious, bare-breasted woman with black hair surrounded by sperm in motion, and a fetus in the corner. Munch, both painter and graphic artist, painted it between 1894 and 1895. He also worked in Germany, and his works featured a highly-charged emotion, gaining significance during the growth of the 20th-century Expressionist movement.

Security provided for works of art is barely existent and amazingly lax. Most museums operate on limited budgets, and could not afford it. In some, such as the Munch, there had not been an alarm system or protection for the paintings. They were attached by wires to the walls, and could be pulled loose, and carried off.

Insurance is a rare practice, even though private collectors might be covered; protection, it is reckoned, can be extremely costly.

AP reports that The Scream joins more than 150,000 lost works of art which specialists say may never be found. Stealing art may be easy, but finding someone to buy it is a long, difficult process. During the millennium celebrations on December 31, 1999, thieves in Oxford, England made off with Paul Cezanne's Anverssur-Oise, worth US\$5 million. The painting has not been found. London writer Edward Dolnick has published an estimate of works of art stolen, lost, and missing, including 551 Picassos, 43 Van Goghs, 174 Rembrandts and 209 Renoirs.

The database at Interpol tallies 20,000 missing art works, paintings making up half of them; while the Art Loss Register in Britain lists perhaps 150,000, with Italian authorities giving a higher number.

A report by *Reuters* revealed how poorly Edvard Munch treated his own art work. It found that the artist often left oil paintings outdoor, exposed to the sun, rain and snow, footprints, even bird droppings, etc. (The Scream and Madonna were not exposed to outdoor conditions). He stunned experts at the time by deliberately not protecting his works from the elements so as to make them appear faded, with broken pastels, holes and scratches. Munch described the treatment as the "horse cure" or "kill-or-cure" process. It seems that he didn't like the heavy, shiny surface of oil paint, and the "cure" helped to give the surfaces a matt look, because it cracked finely and appeared like a fresco or pastel.

It was reported that in 1972, Munch shocked a German art specialist by using a broom to sweep snow off works that were buried in his Oslo garden. Another visitor said that when Munch was living in Berlin in 1893, paintings were found in the wash basin, and others placed on the floor, where some had been walked on.

Munch, who lived from 1863 to 1944, and never married, is known, however, to value his works of art despite the treatment - he referred to his paintings as his "only children". The artist made many versions of his main works; the well-known version of The Scream, in Oslo's National Gallery, contained dribbles of candle wax on the right side, apparently spilt by Munch, and a small hole, dabbed over with blue paint. He once wrote to reassure a friend: "To become a real Munch, they [the paintings] have to have holes and scratches".

A Vermeer sold for \$30m

Johannes Vermeer's 'Young Woman Seated at the Virginals' became the first painting by the Dutch master to be auctioned in more than 80 years. The painting, which for decades has been suspected of being fake, sold for US\$30 million at Sotheby's on 7th of July 2004. Intense bidding took place before an anonymous telephone bidder finally clinched it

Over the last century, art historians have alternately accepted/rejected the painting, but after years of forensic examination, including chemical analysis of the paint and pigment and x-rays of the canvas, 'Young Woman Seated at the Virginals' is finally accepted as a part of the collection of paintings acknowledged as the works of Vermeer by a group of scholars, museum curators, painting conservators, costume experts, paint analysts and auction house experts who studied it. Sotheby's believed it was genuine. The investigation revealed that the pigment in the 25x20cm small painting is identical to that used by Vermeer, and that the canvas is the same size as his 'The Lacemaker' (now displayed in The Louvre Museum, Paris).

'Young Woman Seated at the Virginals', a sensual work that dates about 1670, depicts an intimate scene of a young woman seated at a kind of harpsichord, her eyes gazing directly at the viewer. The origin of it is as obscure as the history of Vermeer who was not a prolific artist; he lived, worked and died (at 43, in 1675) in the picturesque Dutch pottery town of Delft. It appears that the recent popularity and interest in Vermeer has been inspired by the best-selling novel, 'Girl With a Pearl Earring' and the recent movie based on the book.

The previous Vermeer auctioned was 'The Little Street' (1658-1660) in Amsterdam in 1921, which failed to attract a buyer at the sale. It was subsequently bought by a collector who donated it to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Italy: most Unesco heritage sites; Spain in 2nd place

Italy has become the country with the most sites on the United Nations' World Heritage List; with its Etruscan tombs and Tuscan area included as on 14 July 2004.

The 9th century BC Etruscan necropolises include thousands of ancient tombs, murals and elaborate 'tumuli' or burial mounds at two massive cemeteries north of Rome. The other site is the Val d'Orcia rural landscape of rolling hills and picturesque villages near Siena, a region that was redesigned during the 14th and 15th centuries, featuring valleys consisting of vineyards and fortified settlements on top of conical hills.

The famous Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia and the rural landscape of Tuscany's Val d'Orcia increased the number of heritage sites belonging to Italy to thirty-nine. Spain, previously tied with Italy at thirty-seven sites each. The Unesco list includes 788 cultural and natural properties.

Business blighting Borobudur

Borobudur in west Indonesia, built around 800 AD, is the largest Buddhist temple on earth, located in the world's most populous Muslim country. A team of explorers and surveyors, searching for the glorious ruin of a lost site in central Java, discovered the monument under volcanic ash and jungle in the 1800s. It had been abandoned for about a thousand years.

The site has become a major tourist attraction for both Indonesia and Southeast Asia, but the religious significance of the monument, however, does not seem important to many in the country, and commercialization is very much present at the site today.

Borobudur reflects a Buddhist view of the universe, and is a construction of a series of square and circular terraces that visitors can move on toward the top where a stupa (mound-shaped structure sheltering relics) is located, representing nirvana - the ultimate religious experience and enlightenment. On stone walls are carved reliefs that illustrate Buddhist philosophy and the Buddha's life. Staircases lead up to the circular terraces, where stupas host Buddha statues overlooking the tropical green plain and its distant volcanoes.

While Indonesia cashes in the Unesco World Heritage site through tourism, observers are concerned that the increased number of vendors at the site might be putting tourists off. Hawkers haggling visitors is becoming an all too common sight. Tourists find themselves followed by sellers of musical instruments, soft drinks, souvenirs, etc..

The situation led to ideas about cleaning up the site by building a shopping complex. Critics are adamant that such ideas are not solutions to the problem, but rather an exacerbation of it. Somehow, a shopping mall and a place of peace and contemplation do not seem to be incongruous to some tourism promoters. Not even the fact that the landscape there evokes a sense of serenity and peace. Opponents have warned that promotion of shopping tourism within the preservation precinct of Borobudur is not acceptable.

Tourists said they were attracted by a mystique in the monument, but found themselves hassled by sellers on site whom they described as annoying, aggressive, pushy ... and just too many of them. The Buddhist temple and site are in danger of being degraded by commercialization that prevents visitors from enjoying the experience they can expect.

Borobudur drew over two million tourists, mostly local, in 2003. Retail plans recently have shocked many, as they include a 'Jagad Jawa', or 'Spirit World of Java' shopping centre and a rail transport system as proposed by the authorities (held up after negative public reaction).

Unesco and the International Council on Monuments and Sites, which offer advice, suggest that local arts and crafts markets may better help the surrounding communities.

Great Wall crumbling?

Of the 6,300-km Great Wall of China that was constructed or reinforced during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), only about 2,500 km are intact, *Xinhua* news agency cited a report as indicating. The rest of China's 2,000-year-old wall is deteriorated or demolished. The report by the Chinese Academy of the Great Wall has generated demands for more stringent laws to ensure that the cultural heritage survives.

AFP reported that the academy has requested the authorities to examine the state and condition of the whole wall, and implement measures to preserve it.

Heavier punishments for offenders who damage the wall were also in the frame. The report said that some sectors have illegally used part of the wall for tourism and in development projects.

An example was that of a real estate development of 11 villas built close to the Badaling section in Beijing, "damaging the ancient outlook of this segment of the Great Wall".

The state media also reported that white ants

are damaging the famous heritage of China, irretrievably destroying historical structures in the ancient capital of Xian,

It reported the *China Daily* as saying that the insects are biting into the old wood, and monuments such as the Dayan Paoda, built 1,400 years ago, or the even older Beilin Museum, are deteriorating alarmingly.

Apsara angels dance again

Ed Cropley reported for *Reuters* that, today, about 700 students attend Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts, which is "an oasis of calm and serenity amid the hustle and bustle of the Cambodian capital".

Apsara dancing, rooted in ancient mysticism and Hinduistic beliefs in the 1st century AD, is now being taught and learnt by many pupils. The art form has been glorified in the history and courts of the kings who ruled the Angkor empire 800 years ago.

The writer said that Apsara is undergoing a revival after a period of decline and neglect, further complicated by the "cultural nihilism of the Khmer Rouge and the corrosive influence of Western modernism traditions across the developing world".

With top-level political support, and a dedicated and popular television channel, the report indicated that the Apsara dance tradition seems capable of overcoming contemporary influences and culture to shine again as a fine example of Cambodian heritage.

Landscape architect defends authentic Balinese style

A former professional tennis player is now an influential landscape artist in Southeast Asia, and makes his home in Bali, reports Marilyn August.

Michael White, a 51-year-old Australian-born whose Hindu name is Made Wijaya, came to Bali when he was nineteen, a graduate with an architecture degree. He became a Hinduist and has been living on the island.

Wijaya believes that the Balinese architectural language is the best in the tropics in terms of scale, beauty and functionality. Taking from that, his architectural design style has, in twenty-five years, developed into a signature known as the "Tropical Cotswold", combining colours, textures, poetry, and romance. He has been involved in projects relating to 600 gardens in

Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and Hawaii. Singer David Bowie's house on Mustique island in the West Indies was designed by him, as well the homes and gardens of other celebrities, and residences of ambassadors in Jakarta.

His landscape architecture company is based in Bali, and hires some 350 Balinese gardeners, carrying out about 40 projects in the region annually. Currently, Wijaya is working on a Balinese hotel for Bulgari, the Italian luxury company; a spa in the Botanical Gardens in Putrajaya, Malaysia; a boutique hotel in Hoi An, Vietnam; and a book on Indian gardens. He is, however, preoccupied with protecting the Balinese style and culture from a trivialization that usually accompanies fads and popular trends. With the benefit of a column in an English language magazine in Bali, he uses it to protest and caution against "perching fragrant yellow and white frangipani flowers on urinals at the Denpasar airport", and tourism promotion representing "young white nubile females wearing no panties". He scoffed at what he described as "pretty litter" of a new design trend that does not respect the "classical language of Balinese architecture".

Obviously dedicated to the place he has decided to call home, Wijaya recently completed a book, which is a study of traditional Balinese architecture/landscaping and their influence on modern Balinese design. It is a compilation of photographs that he has made for more than 30 years. He said that the publication, *The Architecture of Bali*, was his greatest achievement because he had struggled against time to document the places, many of which are now no longer in existence.

4,000-year-old cave paintings found near Sydney

Aboriginal cave paintings dating back 4,000 years have been discovered close to Sydney, Australia's largest city.

The find was made in the bushland of the National Park northwest of Sydney, a few hours away by car. Over 200 paintings were discovered, and they have been described as one of the most significant discoveries of Aboriginal art in 50 years.

The Wollemi is a group of aborigines in Australia that had been thought to be extinct. A bushwalker found the cave by chance in 1995, but investigators had not been able to access the site until May of 2004.

It was reported that the bushwalker is believed to be the first person to have seen the paintings after the last aborigine departed during European colonisation 200 years ago.

Authorities are maintaining a confidentiality about the precise location of the area to prevent damage and a siege by curious sightseers.

Reports indicated that it is a twelve-metre-long, six-metre-deep and one-to two-metre-high rock shelter, rather than a cave. An anthropologist said that there were 11 layers of more than 200 paintings, stencils and prints executed in a diversity of styles. The art is believed to have spanned the period between about 2000 BC and the early 1800s.

The paintings also provide ideas of the rituals of the aborigines, with human representations and realistic and symbolic depictions of birds, lizards and marsupials, including life-size eagles, kangaroos and a rare wombat.

'Cultural Exception' to US dominance

In the run-up to the global free trade accord in 1994, a group of French movie producers, directors and actors succeeded in removing cinema and other forms of audiovisual entertainment from the agreement. This in effect was regarded as a victory over Hollywood.

Known as the "cultural exception", the practice allows France - and any other country choosing the cultural exception - to minimise foreign competition against its films, television/radio and entertainment industries through subsidies and quotas. This is justified so as to protect from being imposed upon by Hollywood and international media giants in terms of the global entertainment market and expressions of diverse cultures.

Now the World Trade Organisation has gotten into the act, and negotiating on trade in services, with America, Japan and other countries debating the cultural exception practice. Representatives of professional cultural organisations from 35 countries met at the Louvre, Paris to discuss and support the cultural exception, calling for an international Unesco convention on cultural diversity "to remove culture from the World Trade Organisation", as reported by *NYT News Service*.

Part of the arts elite participated in reflecting a political commitment during the three-day meeting,

which was opened by France's culture minister, Jean-Jacques Aillagon, and by Viviane Reding, the European Union's commissioner for education and culture. Representatives went to the Elysée Palace, where President Jacques Chirac met them and major film directors, actors and writers, and strongly endorsed the objectives of the gathering.

The Louvre meeting provided an idea of the difficulties in resisting a dominant American audiovisual industry. Productions in United States, for example, regularly drew 85% of audiences worldwide. In audiovisual trade in 2000 with just the European Union, the United States had an \$8.1 billion surplus, divided equally between movies and television rights.

Professional arts organisations in several countries disagreed with governments that are making concessions on audiovisual issues for benefits in other trade areas; plus, America have bilateral and regional trade accords that often include the audiovisual sector, opening more markets for American movies and television shows.

Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse - World Human Development Report 2004

In our diverse world, more than two-thirds of countries have minority groups that make up more than 10% of their population, and nearly a billion people belong to groups that are subject to some form of exclusion. 'Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World' argues that states must actively devise multicultural policies to prevent discrimination on cultural grounds - religious ethnic and linguistic. The expansion of cultural freedoms, not suppression, is the only sustainable option to promote stability, democracy and human development within and across societies.

The Report debunks the myths that have been used to deny expansions of cultural freedoms, showing that diversity is neither a threat to state unity, nor the source of inevitable "clashes", nor an obstacle to development. Instead, it is at the core of human development - the ability of people to choose who they are.

The Report presents a framework to examine issues that leap from the headlines to the forefront of the international policy agenda: migration, predatory extremism, customary law and cultural diversity. For

more information, contact: Human Development Report Office 304 E. 45th Street, 12th Floor, New York 10017, US. Tel: +1 212 906-3661; Fax: +1 212 906-3677 Go to hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/ Visit: <http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=4366>

New lives for old towns

The first master plan for the conservation and development of Thailand's old towns is to be implemented in June 2004.

Under the five-year plan, known as the Strategy for Old Town Conservation and Development, places of historical significance will be declared as old towns and receive special privileges. A national cultural fund will also be established to finance conservation work.

The blueprint contains two sets of specifications to apply to an old town, to differentiate between areas of extreme historical and archaeological significance, and less important sites. To start, each province will have at least one old town, with committees of local officials, academics and members of the public to supervise conservation and development efforts. Nine provinces are included in the initial implementation, and they are: Chiang Mai, Nan, Lampang, Phitsanulok, Kamphaeng Phet, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, Nakhon Ratchasima and Lop Buri.

Art Websites grow in Thailand

Thai artists are increasingly displaying their works on the internet, easily accepting it as a new frontier in the local art scene. In this respect, Pitakpol Visudhamporn, manager of the Rama IX Art Museum Foundation, has been a pioneer in the field.

He and art collector Sivaporn Tantranondh have through the foundation established two art websites - www.rama9art.org and www.supremeartist.org-with - to provide new venues for local artists to exhibit their contemporary and modern art, as well as to promote the artistic prowess of His Majesty the King, who has been supporting the development of Thai modern art

The establishment of the websites marks a new era for the Thai art world, where a range of Thai contemporary art and the heritage of the modern arts are documented and displayed.

The www.rama9art.org site catalogues works created by 3,000 artists over 50 years (1946-1996).