

# Chicago home holds treasure trove of stolen Italian artifacts

WASHINGTON – Hundreds of artifacts, including letters from 12th-century popes and religious artwork, have been returned to Italy after spending decades in a home near Chicago, FBI spokesman Ross Rice said in a June 8 statement.

The returned items were just a portion of the more than 3,500 letters, artworks and books discovered by family and investigators in the Berwyn, Ill., home of John Sisto after his death in 2007.

While trying to settle his estate, Sisto's family members called the Berwyn Police Department to investigate once they realized the historic value of the collection. The Berwyn police contacted the FBI's Chicago division, and the FBI's Art Crimes Unit spent the next two years identifying the artifacts and determining how such a huge trove made it from Italy to Illinois.

Investigators believe that Sisto's father, Giuseppe "Joseph" Sisto, secretly shipped the items to his son beginning in the early 1960s so John could then resell them at his collectibles shop in Berwyn. The elder Sisto was an Italian native who probably obtained the different artifacts through a third party who looted from museums, libraries and private collections in the Bari region of Italy, Rice said.

John Sisto continued to receive shipments until his father's death in 1982, but Rice said it appears the younger Sisto was more interested in the cultural value of the hoarded collection than the money he could have earned from it on the black market.

The Sistos' shipments were more than just souvenirs – they were pieces of Italian, Roman Catholic and ancient European history. The FBI worked closely with Italian authorities to authenticate the items, which included letters with papal wax seals dating back to the 1100s, Rice said. Etruscan artifacts dating from 500-900 B.C. and handwritten books from the 1700s also filled the boxes and crates stored in Sisto's suburban Chicago home.

After two years of meticulous work, the FBI and Italian authorities determined that approximately 1,600 of the items, worth between \$5 million and \$10 million, were stolen in violation of Italy's century-old cultural property laws, which seek to keep important works of Italian cultural material within the country's borders and available for study and appreciation.

"Anyone who wants to take cultural artifacts out of the country has to get prior approval. Neither (Giuseppe nor John) had done so," Rice explained in a phone interview with Catholic News Service June 12. "However, since both parties are deceased, there is no sense in prosecution" by Italian authorities, Rice said. No charges were filed in Illinois.

Nearly 2,000 other items, which investigators could not positively identify, will go back to the Sisto estate.