

## **The Case of the Ka-Nefer-Nefer Mummy Mask: An Issue of Provenance**

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In 1998, the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM) bought the Ka-Nefer-Nefer mummy mask from Phoenix Ancient Art for half a million dollars. The Pharaonic-era mask had been excavated at Saqqara in 1952, but from there the provenance of the object diverges depending on the party consulted. The museum maintains that the mask immediately made its way into various, sometimes anonymous, European collections, whereas Egypt asserts the object was in storage until 1966 and not discovered missing until 1973. At the time of purchase, the museum consulted with the proper authorities and the then-director of the Cairo Museum to see if the artifact had been reported stolen, and no objection to the purchase was made.

Some years after the purchase, Egyptian officials approached SLAM claiming the mask had been illegally removed from the country, which prompted the United States government to attempt seizure of the artifact. Instead of heeding the request from Egypt and the US government, SLAM then took the unusual action of countersuing. The ordeal played out very publically in the press and academic circles, but the museum proved intractable in their position.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the outcome of this court case, and retrace these events through the primary documents made available by SLAM regarding the suggested provenance of the mask, due diligence correspondence, and documents provided by the government of Egypt. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the ethical problems around this case study and the reconciliation between the museum and source country.