

find her," I had been told by the bungalow chowkidar.

The sun was beginning to dip over the "rao" (the local name for a bouldery forest stream) a few hundred metres to my left, beyond the trees. A golden hue drenched hundreds of blooming kans flowers carpeting the rao that gives Kansrao its name: the stream of kans grass. I heard the faint hoot of a train trundling down the tracks.

As I walked briskly forward, dozens of little grasshoppers jumped comically out of the layer of short grass carpeting the road. Ahead lay a dense cobweb of trees and bushy undergrowth.

By now, I could see the bowing branch. A clearing opened up on my left, and there she was.

"To the Memory of Major Stanley Skinner's Dear Elephant 'Rampyari'. Died Here. On the 6th August, 1922. Having Given Him the Finest Shooting in This World, for 14 Years. Never to be Forgotten. Brave As a Lion, Steady As This Rock" read the epitaph carved on a large block of rock that sat atop a cairn of stones picked from the stream.

The face of the rock that bore the inscription was carved in the shape of an elephant's footpad.

It is said that Rampyari's grave was lost for a few decades, until researchers from the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, undertaking a faunal survey in the area in the 1980s, stumbled upon it.

Despite my best efforts, I could not find any written records of the life and times of Rampyari. I didn't find much about Major Skinner either, but for the fact that he was a descendant of James Skinner or Sikandar Sahib, the Anglo-Indian founder of the famed 1st Horse aka Skinner's Horse regiment of the Indian Army.

Major Stanley followed his beloved Rampyari to happier hunting grounds in 1932. Thereafter, his estate became part of Doon School. Legend has it his ghost still haunts the halls of his bungalow, rechristened Jaipur House; and the abandoned shed behind it, where Rampyari once lived.

The forest department, to its credit, has respected the sanctity of her final resting place.

There is a thoughtful clearing around it, and the engraving on her epitaph has been gently repainted in white. A few round, white-washed stones mark the perimeter of where she lies.

There are, thankfully, no gaudy signboards, concrete, chains or grilles to "secure" the space; nothing that would spoil the sombre beauty of this place. I pray it always remains so.

I sat beside her for a while. Cushioned by deep emerald forests, she lies overlooking a carpet of green, with noble verdant trees as her steadfast sentinels.

Just then, I noticed that I was not the only one to have come to pay his respects at her final resting place.

She has other visitors too.

Around her grave I could clearly see the footprints of wild elephants. I smiled to myself.

It was quiet, serene and beautiful. I sat there, tranquil, until a few playful langur monkeys settling in for the night reminded me that it was time to bid Rampyari goodbye.

As I turned to leave, I brushed my hand against her epitaph one last time, and in that moment I thought I heard the tinkling of an elephant bell from somewhere far away.

(Raza Kazmi is a conservationist and wildlife historian)

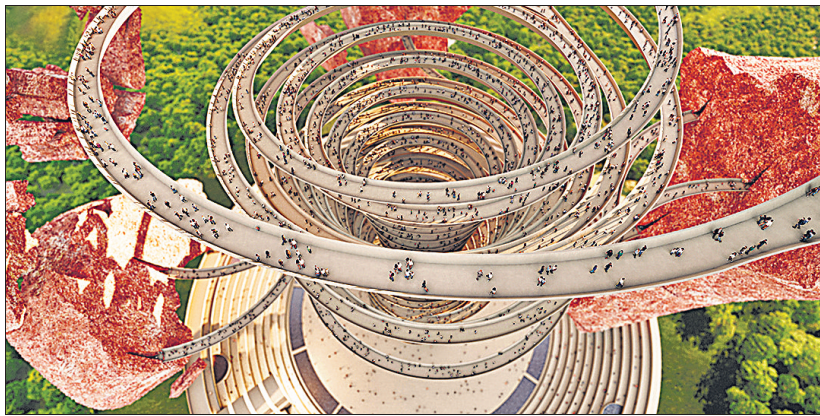


Malay Karmakar 2026

culture

Wish you were here

What does it mean when an ancient cultural artefact is taken? Six months after Unesco set up its virtual museum of stolen objects, dive into the grief, notes of loss, and rare returns



(Right) The virtual museum unfolds along a spiral path, fanning out like a baobab tree. (Below) An amphora from Libya, a figurine of the resurrected and the devil taken from an altarpiece in Estonia, and an idol of Nataraja from India. IMAGES: STUDIO FRANCIS KÉRÉ; MUSEUM. UNESCO.ORG

Sukanya Datta

sukanya.datta@hindustantimes.com

Unlike most museums, this one hopes that its collection, instead of growing, will shrink. This is already happening, somewhat.

Before Unesco (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) launched its Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects, three items had faded from its "shelves". (They were returned a few months before the launch.) Six months on, the site (museum.unesco.org) has had over 160,000 visitors and logged more than 1.4 million page views, per Unesco data.

The virtual space aims to raise awareness about the impact of the illicit trafficking of cultural property, and encourage restitution and good practices, says Sunna Altnoder, head of Unesco's illicit trafficking and return and restitution unit. In keeping with this aim, the dramatically designed virtual space (more on that in a bit) was launched in September, in partnership with Saudi Arabia's ministry of culture, and the International Criminal Police Organization or Interpol.

Recorded here are over 250 artefacts: art works, ceremonial and religious objects, musical instruments, natural specimens, ancient inscriptions and archaeological finds looted from historic sites, museums, religious institutions or private collections; or misplaced or extracted during conflicts.

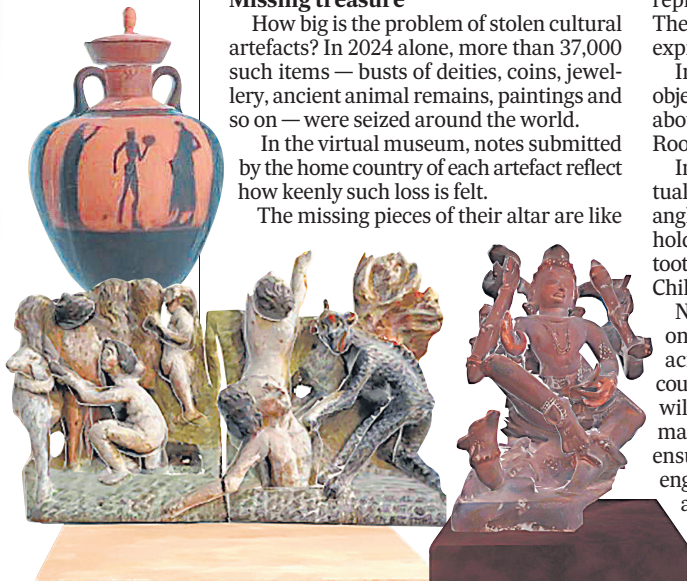
There are plans to expand the collection; the Interpol database lists over 57,000 such thefts. (Sadly, it does not include most colonial-era losses, which continue to be negotiated diplomatically between governments rather than registered as thefts.)

Missing treasure

How big is the problem of stolen cultural artefacts? In 2024 alone, more than 37,000 such items — busts of deities, coins, jewellery, ancient animal remains, paintings and so on — were seized around the world.

In the virtual museum, notes submitted by the home country of each artefact reflect how keenly such loss is felt.

The missing pieces of their altar are like



{ THE SPORTING LIFE }
Rudraneil Sengupta



Hit or myth?

We've grown used to IPL shining a light on the next big cricket stars, as rookies turn heroes overnight. Who will it be this year?

Chennai Super Kings has signed the reigning king of big hitting, Sanju Samson, 31.



The Indian Premier League (IPL) is upon us and, with it, another season of stormy hitting, lurid jerseys, global stars and frenetic action.

As the tournament progresses, it will give Indian cricket that most precious of gifts: the discovery of the country's next big cricket stars. So many have travelled this route to the national team: Jasprit Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Rishabh Pant, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Rinku Singh...

Who will it be this year?

The name that comes first to mind is Aaquib Nabi. Since cricket's global shift to the 20-overs format, IPL has replaced the Ranji Trophy as the tournament in which stars are unearthed. But, occasionally, there comes a player whose Ranji performance is so fierce that they shoot forward regardless of an IPL appearance.

Twenty-nine-year-old Nabi's record 60 wickets recently took Jammu & Kashmir to a fabulous first-ever Ranji title. Snubbed at the IPL auctions despite superb performances in past Ranji seasons, he has now been bought by Delhi Capitals. An India call-up for the disciplined fast-bowler feels inevitable.

"missing pages of a story", representatives of Estonia's Kaarma Church on Saaremaa Island write, of 16th-century wooden sculptures of Mary, an angel, the resurrected and the devil, stolen from their place of worship. These formed part of an altarpiece.

"It is almost impossible to assign a material value to these sculptures," a representative of the Saaremaa Museum said, speaking to the press soon after the theft, in 1999.

Burkina Faso has submitted images of an 8th-century granite statuette of Taga-Bi, a protective deity designed as the twin sister of another statuette, Oure-Bi, with both used in rituals of the Kurumba community.

India has submitted three religious statues, of the deities Bhairava, Nataraja and Brahma, all originating in parts of modern-day Chhattisgarh, between the 6th and 9th centuries CE.

Among the Sudanese artefacts is a statue of Queen Nawidemak, a 1st century CE gold sculpture from Ancient Nubia that likely served a ceremonial or symbolic function. "It is particularly important as it represents a female monarch, something that was common in Nubian society but rare elsewhere in the ancient world," the object note states.

"Such thefts are always more than a material loss," says Altnoder. "Sometimes rituals cannot take place anymore; in all cases, a theft deprives the community of their rights to use and enjoy their cultural property."

A world-wide web

The "structure" of the virtual museum is inspired by an ancient symbol. It unfolds along a spiral path, fanning out like a baobab tree. "The baobab is a symbol of resilience and a central figure in the lives of many African communities," says architect Diébédo Francis Kéré, originally from Burkina Faso and now practising in Germany. "The roots represent the foundations of our identity. The branches reflect the various forms and expressions of culture across continents."

Inside are three "halls": the gallery of objects; an auditorium (where one may learn about the museum and its mission); and the Room of Return and Restitution.

In the first gallery, each item sits on a virtual pillar and can be viewed from different angles. The Room of Return and Restitution holds three objects from Morocco: a shark's tooth and two trilobite fossils intercepted by Chilean Customs authorities in 2024.

New halls will be added, to offer primers on what is illegal to buy, trade in and take across international borders, in various countries. The hope is that such information will help the general public, as well as art market professionals, do due diligence to ensure, Altnoder says, that the objects they engage with have not been illicitly trafficked and taken against the wishes of the communities and people they belong to.

This will, meanwhile, be a pivotal season for Chennai Super Kings (CSK). They finished bottom of the rankings last season, weighed down by an ageing squad. With MS Dhoni as their eternal mascot, the team has often relied on experience over youth, hoping sharp cricketering brains will trump big-hitting brawn. But that era would appear to be at an end.

Coaches have made giant strides in big-hitting training protocols, so that batters are now able to hit almost any ball for a six. Every season of IPL has seen more boundaries hit than the previous one. A boundary was hit every 4.67 balls last season.

CSK has shown a willingness to embrace this change, signing the reigning king of big hitting, Sanju Samson, 31, and shelling out record sums for rookies with promise such as Prashant Veer, 20, and Kartik Sharma, 19 (each bought for Rs 14.2 crore, the highest ever for an uncapped player).

Both made their First Class debut last year. Sharma is from Bharatpur, Rajasthan, where his family sold farmland, property and jewellery and then took loans to fuel his dream. Veer from Shahjipur in Uttar Pradesh was scouted from a local T20 league.

Watch out also for Mangesh Yadav, 23, acquired by Royal Challengers Bengaluru for Rs 5.2 crore. He comes from a small village called Borgaon in Madhya Pradesh and was scouted from the state T20 league. And watch out for Ashok Sharma, 23, who hit the magic 150 kmph mark while bowling in domestic tournaments this year.

Sharma is from a village near Jaipur and almost gave up on cricket after he failed to make the transition from Rajasthan's U19 to U23 squads. Then he joined a fast-bowling talent hunt and reached the final, got scouted by Rajasthan Royals, became their net bowler (in 2024) and then a bench player (2025) before Gujarat Titans bought him for Rs 90 lakh this season.

There's plenty of promise. The suggestion of drama. What's not to love?

(Email Rudraneil Sengupta on rudraneil@gmail.com. The views expressed are personal)