

MAG038 – Case #0120606 – “Lost and Found”

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Andre Ramao, regarding a series of misplaced objects lost over the course of three months. Original statement given June 6th 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thank you for lending me your pen. I thanked you when you handed it to me, but I don't know if you'll remember. I wonder, will you... forget you lent it to me and believe that it was my pen all along? Maybe instead you'll forget that I ever had one to begin with, and think of me as an idiot who

turned up to give a statement without a pen, so you had to lend me yours. My own fault for putting it down, really. Assuming I did ever have one. I'll try to keep a slightly closer hold on this one.

I've been in the antiques business for a long time. It's not what it used to be. [Nervous chuckle] I'm sorry, I know. I always did that, try to make myself feel more comfortable with jokes. There's a follow up to that one, you know. Something along the lines of the joke being so old only an antiques dealer would be able to sell it. I love that one; I think it's clever, but in my whole life it's only ever gotten a laugh once. That's why I remember buying the vase so clearly. I remember that the seller laughed.

In the old days, I never would have considered buying wares from the likes of Mikaele Salesa. He

has a good reputation for quality, but a... bad reputation for legality, as it were. I've had more than one acquaintance sell on a particularly valuable find they got from him, only to discover that it didn't have proper import papers, or that it had been reported stolen years before. Charlie Miller even did some jail time over a Georgian brooch he bought off him, so as a general rule I'd have given Salesa's stuff a wide berth, but... Well, the antiques business isn't what it used to be. That isn't a joke. I had to close up my shop a few years ago, you see. Actual antiques don't sell to the mass market anymore. Oh, young people will snap up vintage clothes or have any number of cheap faux-antique replicas strewn about their living rooms, but as soon as they get a look at the price tag for the real thing? They're out of there like a shot.

So I went the same way as a lot of my peers. Lose the premises, start selling only high-margin goods direct to specific clients who can afford them, or shift a few guaranteed sellers on the auction. It's the only real way to stay afloat in the business nowadays, but the competition is intense, and getting the calibre of artefact you need has become a more cutthroat affair. I'm not the only one in the business to recently soften their attitude towards buying from people like Mikaele Salesa.

It was my first meeting with him, back in March, and I was nervous, so I told my joke. Just off-hand, almost a reflex. I didn't expect any reaction, really, I... I certainly didn't expect him to laugh. But he did, this sudden, deep, throaty laugh that seemed to come out of nowhere. He didn't say anything afterwards, just continued discussing business. But it stayed with me. There was

nothing particularly strange about the laugh, not really. Why do I remember it so clearly?

Salesa was taking me through his 'showroom'. There was a fancy-looking sign above the door, but it didn't do much to hide the fact that it was basically a warehouse. More of the antiques were still in their packing crates, and I couldn't help making a note of how quick and easy it would be for him to pack everything down and disappear if he needed to. Still, I'd made a few good purchases already and was cautiously optimistic. I'd bought a pair of cavalry sabres from the Revolutionary War, absolutely excellent condition, and a British artilleryman's tunic from World War I, a few other bits and pieces as well. I recall I felt a moment of relief that I didn't deal in books, as I caught sight of several crates packed to the brim with heavy-looking volumes. I was looking for something big,

though. Something that would make an actual dent in the mountain of debt I'd been piling up.

I found it in that old Chinese pot. From the Jiajing period, so Salesa said, and the construction seemed to back him up. The glaze and the workmanship fitted with mid-to-late Ming dynasty, but there was something... off about the actual design. Instead of the pictures or scenes common to the ceramics of the period, the blue glaze was painted on in crisp, thin geometric lines. They repeated perfectly and seemed to get smaller and more intricate the closer I looked, but the shapes they formed never lost any of the precision, seeming to continue on however closely I looked. The effect was disorientating, and made the vase seem smaller than it actually was. It made my head hurt a bit when I looked at it for too long. It was amazing.

When he saw me staring, Salesa clapped me on the back and named a price that almost made me choke. We haggled a bit, and eventually reached a price I considered only a little bit unreasonable. I hurried my purchases home, feeling slightly soiled by my visit to the warehouse, and very much hoping it would be a good few months, if not years, before I was in such dire straits that I needed to go again. I got home, had a shower and some food and immediately started to look into finding a buyer for my latest acquisitions. I remember I was planning to make a few calls, but my headache got so bad that I had to have an early night.

The problems started soon after. It was little things at first. Like my shoes. I'm not a particularly fashion-conscious man at the best of times, so I have three pairs of shoes. Comfortable loafers for everyday use, a pair of walking boots

for hiking, and some well-shined, polished, leather brogues for fancier events. Well, I had a rather upmarket auction that I needed to attend, so I went to put on my nice shoes, but they were nowhere to be found. Not the shoes, not the box I kept them in. Instead there was bag containing two shirts that I know for a fact I threw away the year before. When I asked my husband, David, about it, he told me point blank that I had never had any such shoes. Claimed I always wore my loafers when I went to auctions or parties.

I know that compared to some of the ghost stories you must hear in this place, a pair of misplaced shoes seems perfectly trivial, but something felt so... wrong about the whole situation. In the end I did go in my loafers. I don't remember if anyone at the auction noticed.

It was about a week later that I got the invoice from Salesa. It was a pleasant surprise, far less than I thought we'd agreed on. That feeling lasted until I looked through the itemised list and realised why the cost was so low. He hadn't charged me for the Ming. I'll admit that I was somewhat conflicted over whether to raise the issue, but in the end I decided that even if Mikaele Salesa did work with thieves, I was not going to be counted among them. So I phoned him to try and explain the mistake.

He seemed to be in a fine mood when he answered the phone, and asked me if I'd had a chance to try out the sabres yet, which I'm pretty sure was a joke. I told him that there was an item he'd missed off the invoice, and he said that no, everything had been double-checked and was correct. I was getting suspicious at this point, and thought he might be trying to pull a fast one of

some sort with me, maybe get me to take the blame for some illicit scheme gone wrong. I told him so in no uncertain terms, and described our encounter and the vase in minute detail. He was quiet for a few seconds, and then asked me if I could send him a photo of the pot. His tone was different, and he sounded oddly wary when he made the request. I was very on edge by this point, but could come up with no good reason not to agree, so I took a few pictures with my phone and sent them through to him.

It was a long time before he spoke again, and when he did he sounded... different. Almost scared, I thought. He told me that I could keep it. No charge. I began to protest again, but he ignored it. I remember his exact words: "I do not remember having that thing, which means it belongs to you." Then he hung up.

This was all very strange, of course, but even then I wasn't worried. Not like I should have been.

It was my book next. A signed copy of *Catch-22*, my favourite book. Vanished from its place on my bookshelf, leaving only an empty space behind.

David just gave me another blank stare when I asked him about it. I admit I almost lost it at him then. Shoes were one thing, but that book meant a lot to me. I accused him of playing some stupid joke, and tried to remind him what I'd gone through to get it, flying over to America for Joseph Heller's last book tour, queuing for hours and then that dreadful evening I thought that sudden rainstorm had ruined it all. By the end he was looking... very alarmed indeed and started to ask me how I was feeling. He wanted to know if I'd been under a lot of stress at work, if there was anything I wanted to talk about. I left.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I am crazy. It makes a lot more sense, doesn't it? It would make it neat. Except no. No, I would need to have gone mad a long, long time before this for the idea of it being in my head to hold up. My perceptions are the only ones I can trust. Maybe. I don't know.

This went on for months. The tie I got for my last birthday, my grandfather's teapot, the tunic I bought from Salesa, things just kept going missing, and every time David would tell me that whatever it was didn't exist. Or it wasn't mine. Or I was misremembering. For a while I thought he was actually trying to gaslight me, make me think I was losing my mind, but when the tunic went missing I called Salesa again. This time he laughed when he told me that he didn't remember selling any World War I items to me on my visit. I checked the invoice, and it was no

longer listed there. Just empty, accusing paper where the words had been.

I know these things were real. I know they existed. Why won't anyone just believe me?

This is where I started to come undone a bit. To be honest I don't think anyone would do much better in my situation. I hadn't made any connection between the old Chinese pot and the disappearances. I mean, why would I? But I also hadn't been able to sell it. Whenever I tried, something would get in the way. The other person would forget to send through a crucial email, or they'd stop responding. Once I managed to get it as far as posting it out to a buyer, but it was returned immediately with a note asking why it had been sent to her. Gradually, I began to get suspicious of the thing. Sitting there, with its cascading, maddening patterns in that vile cobalt

blue. Trying to tell me that I things didn't exist, that they hadn't vanished when I know they have.

I took to watching it. I wasn't getting much sleep and David was worried sick about me. I know he was talking to various doctors about getting me help. There were certainly a couple of points I was worried about him having me sectioned. None of it helps in the end.

It was about a month ago. I had placed the vase in the centre of the table, and was sat staring at it. Keeping an eye on it. Checking for... god knows what. This had been my ritual for the previous week, keeping my vigil into the small hours, but that night... that night I fell asleep in front of it. I don't remember my dream. Running, maybe? I know I woke with a start sometime around 2 in the morning.

As I tried to rub the sleep from my eyes, I heard a sound from the table in front of me. It was the dull thump of a heavy book hitting the tabletop. I looked and, sure enough, there was my copy of *Catch-22*, just lying there in front of that strange ceramic thing. And not just my book, there was a small pile of objects around the base. My shoes, a tie, things I don't even remember losing. One by one they rose up out of the mouth of the vase and tumbled to the table. It didn't matter how big they were, they all seemed to fit.

And then came the moment when everything had been disgorged. I saw all the things that I had lost, and I thought it must be over. It must be done. What else could possibly come of there? And I saw the pale shapes of long, thin fingertips begin to creep above the lip of the pot. I remember thinking that it couldn't be a normal person living in that pot, because the fingernails were too dirty.

Isn't that an odd thing to think at a time like that?

I ran, of course. Turned around and sprinted out of the door and into the street and didn't return until morning. Maybe I should have called the police, but I was in no state to do much of anything except shiver under a tree for hours. David was gone. I allowed myself some brief hope that maybe he'd just left me, maybe he'd escape with just a divorce. But no. One call to the housing association confirmed that, as far as they were concerned, I'd always lived alone.

I want to smash that thing. I want to dash its maddening patterns to the ground and stomp on it until there is nothing left but powder. But it's also disappeared, of course. I can't find it anywhere. It's still taking things, though. Sorry about your pen.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Before I dig too deeply into the background of this statement, I feel I should mention something that puts much of it in a slightly different light. Tim actually managed to find a copy of Mr. Ramao's marriage licence. It exists, is signed, dated and official, and half of it is blank. Only Mr. Ramao's details are on the document, and if it wasn't for the context of this statement, it would appear he was married to nobody. But he was married.

This is not the first time Mikaele Salesa's name has come to the attention of the Institute. Even discounting the incidental role he played in case #0112905, he appears to have something of a knack for locating objects displaying more... disconcerting phenomena. I believe some of the more bizarre things in the Artefact Storage area

were purchased from him. It has been something
of a—

Urgh. Urgh.

[SOUND OF CHAIR SCRAPING]

I see you...

[THUMP... THEN SOUND OF COLLAPSING
SHELVES]

[NOISES OF EXCLAMATION]

[DOOR OPENS]

SASHA

Alright?

ARCHIVIST

Ah... Yeah. A... spider.

SASHA

A spider?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. I tried to kill it.... the shelf collapsed.

SASHA

I swear, cheap shelves are... Did you get it?

ARCHIVIST

Ah... I hope so. Thinks so. Nasty, bulbous looking thing.

SASHA

[Chuckles] Well, I won't tell Martin.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, god. I don't think I could stand another lecture on their importance to the ecosystem.

[SHUFFLING NOISES]

What?

SASHA

Look.

ARCHIVIST

Oh... uh... Got dented when the shelf collapsed, I guess.

SASHA

No, it, it goes right through. I, I thought this was an exterior wall?

ARCHIVIST

It should be.

SASHA

Hmm. I, I think it's just plasterboard.

[LOW NOISES OF DEBRIS]

Do you see anything?

[QUIET, BUILDING SOUND OF WET WRIGGLING]

ARCHIVIST

No, I don't think so, it...

[WORM SOUND INTENSIFIES]

Sasha, run. RU—

[CLICK]