

From an appraiser: The case of the dumb smuggler

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A local man who had escaped from the 2005 Ethiopian massacres returned to the Mideast to retrieve his hidden wealth in the form of gold. He had been able to ship the gold out of Ethiopia to another country and made into rings. He smuggle 22 karat gold jewelry into the U.S. He was caught. Smuggling is a felony. Customs held him for several hours, seized the gold, and seriously complicated his status as a legal alien. Had he declared the importation of gold rings, they were likely 'duty-free' and he would have a minor delay getting through Customs. Hence, the title, "the case of the dumb smuggler." Another local citizen smuggled what appeared to be a hoard of ancient Islamic coins which Customs suspected came from the Bagdad Museum. The coins were not from Iraq. Had he declared the coins, there would have been a minor delay instead of the turmoil. Another man coming from Hong Kong with five fake Rolex watches declared them found himself in a serious mess charged with importing counterfeit merchandise. One watch for personal use may have been ok, but five was not. The counterfeit goods were seized. The fine and penalties for importation of counterfeit goods is based on the manufacturer's suggested retail price. There are many incidences wherein people smuggle when they should have declared. Save aggravation and avoid fines and penalties by declaring things you bring into the U.S.

Tens of thousands pass through the portals carrying legally importable items, illegally imported items, and smuggled goods. During the Iranian Embargo (1977-2000) thousands of Persian rugs were smuggled into the U.S. When found they were contraband and seized by U.S. Customs. The U.S. Customs Service, now titled, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, controls the importation of everything. If you are entering the U.S. with something you purchased outside the country, declare it! Typically, antiques (at least 100 years old) and general purchases are duty-free. It is that simple. Simple can become complicated. Some things like ivory, leopard skin, tortoise shell, Mayan pre-Columbian objects, Iraq cultural property, Khmer stone sculpture, and scrimshaw are illegal to import and will be seized and you will be subject to fines and penalties.

Smuggling, (i.e. sneaking items into the country) is a crime and depending on the items smuggled, it could be a felony. At a minimum, you should expect fines, penalties, and potentially seizure. Oh, and the funny looking guy with the long beard and earrings walking behind you in line is probably a U.S. Customs Agent.

Durkin is the contract appraiser for U.S. Customs, FBI, IRS, Postal Inspection Service and the Secret Service seizures. He was the Customs appraiser for oriental rugs from the Port of Buffalo, Port of Baltimore to Boston. He appraised smuggled goods from Bagdad including oil paintings of Sadam Hussein, the Islamic Coins, and other "souvenirs" brought back by visiting dignitaries.

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