

CASE OF THE DISMANTLING OF AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF ELEPHANT IVORY AND RHINOCEROS HORN TRAFFICKERS OPERATING FROM FRANCE - PART 1

On September 10, 2015 at 11:30 p.m., leaving the A10 freeway which passes a few kilometers away, a BMW enters the French town of Dangé-Saint-Romain, 3,000 inhabitants. A squad of 9 customs officers accompanied by a dog handler stops the vehicle at a traffic circle. On board, Tom Greene, Edward Gammel and Richard O'Riley seem uncontrollably nervous, which is behavior considered by customs officers around the world to signal a confession. Tom, acting as the group's spokesman, declares in English that they are antique dealers coming from Bordeaux (300 km) on their way to Tours (60 km) and then to Paris (300 km). "We are touring France for our business." At 11:40 p.m., a first elephant tusk is discovered wrapped in a bathrobe. Next to it, a travel bag contains an envelope of banknotes. Then under the floor mat and under the steering wheel, 3 more tusks and additional bundles of cash are uncovered. To provide supporting legal documents, Tom presents an auction slip dated July 11, 2015 issued by the Hôtel des Ventes Cannes Enchères. But the tusks in the car do not correspond to those sold in Cannes that day.

Details of the tusks seized in the BMW:

- 1- 140 cm for 15.7 kg
- 2- 139 cm for 15.8 kg
- 3- 96 cm for 5.6 kg
- 4- 94 cm for 5.5 kg

Excerpts from the catalog of the Cannes Enchères sale of July 11, 2015 (Robin des Bois Archives)

SAMEDI 11 JUILLET 2015



Paire de défenses d'éléphant d'Afrique

L environ : 188 et 187,5 cm (courbe externe)
Poids environ : 32 et 31,5 Kg
Provenance : Tchad
CITES français pre-convention 1974
(origine OW) : FR1103101274-K et
FR1103101275-K

Expert : Jean-Yves Nathan - T : 06 16 68 15 80
10 000 / 15 000 €

Paire de défenses d'éléphant d'Afrique

L environ : 183 et 175,2 cm (courbe externe)
Poids environ : 15 et 15,6 Kg
Provenance : République Centrafricaine
CITES français pre-convention 1965
(origine OW) : FR1208300226-K et
FR1208300227-K

Expert : Jean-Yves Nathan - T : 06 16 68 15 80
5 000 / 7 000 €

Paire de défenses d'éléphant d'Afrique

L environ : 112 et 114 cm (courbe externe)
Poids environ : 9 et 9 Kg
Provenance : République Centrafricaine
CITES français pre-convention avant
1963 (origine OW) : FR1501100054-K et
FR1501100053-K

Expert : Jean-Yves Nathan - T : 06 16 68 15 80
3 000 / 4 000 €

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Tom claims to have bought the tusks for 4,200 € at an open-air market in Bordeaux from a Turkish man's van. The overall value of the 4 tusks weighing a total of 42.6 kg is estimated by the customs officers to be 42,600 €. The trio was traveling with a total of 32,800 € in cash.

Taken to the customs office, Tom declares that he is the only one responsible for the "merchandise." Well informed but perhaps not fully awake, the deputy prosecutor authorizes, as the French regulation, alas, allows it, a customs transaction. On September 11, 2015 at 3:30 a.m., after paying 10,000 € in cash, the 3 traffickers left freely, with 22,800 € in cash, a properly stamped receipt, but without the 4 tusks that were seized. We can imagine their immense joy. 3 days later, they were caught by a traffic camera for speeding at 1:45 a.m. in the south of France, in the opposite direction of Paris where they claimed to be going.

However, the case is not yet closed. The Customs Settlement Form still lacks the signature of the Regional Director.

During the inspection in Dangé-Saint-Romain, a customs officer discovered a passport and a driver's license issued in the name of Joseph Doyle on the back seat of the BMW among other personal items. Upon questioning, Tom Greene answered that the papers belonged to one of his cousins. After the 3 men departed, the customs officers realized that the identity photograph, date and place of birth of Joseph Doyle are the same as those of Tom Greene.

Tom Greene and Joseph Doyle are the same man. The continued investigation eventually revealed that he is also Joseph O'Brien, in long form Joseph O'Brien "Cotton Eye" Junior, and that he is additionally called John Greene.

The investigations then concern the Cannes Enchères auction slip created in the name of the SAS E2AR Distribution located in Le Blanc-Mesnil in the Parisian suburbs. This company is run by David Ta, a French-Vietnamese man inspected 2 months earlier in July 2015 by the customs of Angers on the A11 highway with tusks acquired in auction rooms in Angers and Toulouse along with their certificates. At that time, trade in raw ivory was still authorized in France, but exports had been suspended since January of the same year; because of David Ta's regular trips to Viet Nam, customs officials had activated a special vigilance procedure. In the meantime, customs officials are making connections with the National Intelligence Directorate's notice issued in 2012 on the organized group of Irish criminals called the Rathkeale Rovers, who are known for their use of false identity documents and are involved in stealing and trafficking rhinoceros horns and elephant ivory, among other crimes. The Rathkeale Rovers are versatile (Rathkeale Rovers, see "On the Trail" n°1 p.22, n°2 p. 48, 49, 50 and 52, n°4 p.67 and p.69-70, n°5 p.76, n°7 p.75, n°8 p.66, n°9 p.69, n°10 p.49, n°12 p.72, n°13 p.76, n°14 p.97, n°15 p.86, n°16 p.70, n°18 p.78, n°19 p.87, n°27 p.88 and n°30 p.49). The customs transaction is not validated. 10,000 € is withheld for "penalty securities" and the preliminary investigation is entrusted to the National Judicial Customs Service (SNDJ).

Within the framework of the investigation, the specialized customs officers arrive at the campsite "Le Soleil de Crécy" in Crécy-la-Chapelle, 50 km from Paris. The Rathkeale clan are regulars here, so much so that the manager opened a binder labeled "Rathkeale" on its spine, which recorded the many appearances from February to November 2014 of the O'Briens, Culligans, Quilligans, Sheridans, Flynnns, McCarthy's, etc., names, nicknames, aliases, homonyms, and all the rest going around in high-end vehicles. They also shipped 36 mobile homes from "Le Soleil de Crécy" to camping/caravanning sites in Germany. Our 3 men, Tom Greene, Edward Gammel and Richard O'Riley, are not listed as "campers," at least not under those names. But obviously, France is a primary base for the Rathkeale gang.

Alexandre Debussy, associate director of Cannes Enchères, was called to witness on December 3, 2015. He has made a specialty of circumventing the ban on exports of raw ivory from France by transporting the tusks through Belgium under the cover of a CITES certificate authorizing the intra-European circulation of the tusks (Cannes Enchères, see "On the Trail" n°5 p.105, n°6 p.72, n°8 p.68-69). Exports are then made from Belgium to Asia where there is demand and wealthy customers. David Ta, with whom Mr. Debussy is on a first-name basis, is a loyal customer: he made 197,500 € in purchases between July 2013 and October 2015 including 24 raw tusks, 3 carved tusks, 24 objects made of ivory or with ivory inlay and one Ottoman dagger with a rhinoceros horn handle. Before the investigators, Mr. Debussy insists on the legality of this trade within the European community. It is without unnecessary questions that he met Mr. Ta's expectations by issuing auction slips for the benefit of E2AR Distribution, address: Hanoi, Viet Nam. At the request of the investigators, Alexandre Debussy explained his "special elephant and rhinoceros tax", i.e. 1% deducted in addition to the sale costs to be paid to animal protection associations preferring to remain anonymous, which we understand. "We are the only ones to have instituted this tax that Ségolène Royal was aware of." Mr. Debussy is thus trying to exploit the Minister of the Environment who banned raw ivory exports from France and who provoked a raid by inspectors at Cannes Enchères in March 2015. At the end of his hearing, the self-proclaimed ivory and horn specialist claimed to have no knowledge of ivory, elephant tusks, rhino heads or horns being stolen from private collections or national museums. He is the only one in the industry not to be aware of the surge in thefts that has been raging throughout Europe since 2011.

In December 2015, the 4 tusks seized from the Rathkeale Rovers' BMW were submitted to the expertise of the Paris Natural History Museum. The African elephant tusks are obviously relatively new, "collections made after 2000 are very likely." One of the pairs is attributed to an elephant under 10 years old and another to a young adult.

The international smuggling network is taking shape. The 2 statues of a deity in the form of an elephant framing the entrance door of the E2AR Distribution company show the investigators the way. Banking profiles from the investigation suggest that there is often confusion between the E2AR company accounts and David Ta's personal account. Textiles plus hygiene and beauty products apparently form the heart of his business. Despite numerous incoming bank movements to its account from Asia (Viet Nam, China, Thailand and Hong Kong), Europe (Great Britain, Poland, Switzerland), Canada and Panama as well as outgoing movements to Hong Kong and France, the customs database has never recorded any import or export transactions from E2AR since 2014. David Ta and E2AR also do not appear in the i-CITES database which lists all applicants for and holders of CITES permits or certificates. On May 23, 2016, the judge of liberty and detention signs "the authorization of search without the consent of the persons" on the premises of E2AR Distribution where Mr. Ta also lives.

The search at E2AR takes place on May 25, 2016 at 10:50 a.m. An expert in zoology and animal collections from the Court of Appeal of Paris was requested. Less than 4 hours later, customs left with 14 tusks found under a blanket and a pallet, 2 tusks found under a piece of furniture, a jar containing 20 seahorses, a plethora of auction slips, Intra-Community Certificates (ICC), summons for a hunting permit, accounting documents, correspondences ... The value of the 16 tusks seized (212 kg) is estimated to be 212,000 €. There is no correlation between the tusks and the certificates found at E2AR: the 16 tusks seized are undocumented while the 23 tusks with a total weight of 417.5 kg corresponding to the certificates have probably already been smuggled to Asia. Mr. Ta's passport bears the marks of his many return trips to Viet Nam and he carries a FlyingBlue Air France/KLM "Ivory" frequent flyer card and a Viet Nam Airlines "Golden Lotus Plus Silver" frequent flyer card.



Unregistered tusks at E2AR on May 25, 2015
Le Blanc-Mesnil, Seine-Saint-Denis Department

David Ta was taken into custody at 2:30 p.m. He had in his pocket a small exchange office - euros, Vietnamese dong, Singapore dollars, US dollars, Yen, and Czech crowns -, 3 credit cards, business cards from antique dealers and second hand dealers in France and Belgium, from hotels in Hong Kong and Viet Nam, a logistician and customs broker, pharmaceutical salesmen in Viet Nam, a Vietnamese woman living in the Czech Republic, a French health insurance card, a German health insurance card in the name of Davit Ta, a drouot.com card and of course Alexandre Debussy's card.

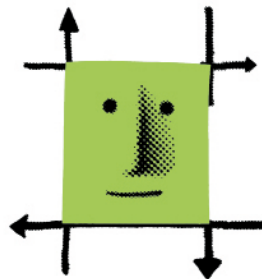
David Ta reveals that he alternates staying for one month in France, then for one month in Viet Nam to develop his cosmetic brand and has been several times to Cambodia, once to Singapore, once to Hong Kong and once to Japan "to see the market." In his absence, his partner takes care of the company. Buying and selling antiques is a recent activity for him. He began at most 3 years ago. He scours the Internet sites of auctions by professionals or private individuals plus flea markets, secondhand trades and auction houses throughout France and in Monaco. His remote purchases are sometimes picked up by acquaintances of his, such as his friend the "ex-ambassador of Belgium in Viet Nam." David Ta remembers buying 10 or so pairs of tusks and about a hundred worked ivory objects "over 50 or 60 years old." Why are the tusks seized at E2AR's premises not accompanied by CITES or CIC certificates? Because Mr. Ta is not always there to verify everything at the time of delivery. Why do these tusks bear the marks of debasement and other manipulations? "Because I wanted to change the base to a more beautiful Asian style one." For the Vietnamese customers? "No! I keep them for myself, for my collection (...) it is to show my success to the customers." A collection of pomp and circumstance, but hidden under a blanket and a pallet. Of course, Mr. Ta denies having exported the 23 missing tusks. He says he makes 100% of his sales in Viet Nam, except for the ivory he collects and with the exception of 2 pairs of tusks sold to the China Shanghai restaurant in Lucerne, Switzerland, for which an invoice from E2AR is put in front of him. And why does Mr. Ta want to obtain a hunting license? "So that I can hunt wild boar and pheasant." Another propensity for animals? "I only bought a stuffed cobra with a mongoose." And the jar of seahorses? "A Vietnamese friend gave it to me maybe 10 years ago. It comes from Viet Nam. In fact, it is based on a preparation called vodka and seahorse. In Viet Nam it is consumed as an aperitif or digestive."

David Ta affirms he doesn't know O'Brien, Greene, Gamel, or any of the Rathkeale Rovers. If the latter group possessed an auction slip from Cannes Enchères belonging to E2AR Distribution, it was because of a fortuitous meeting. "When I was at the flea market in Lille, the first week of September 2015, I was approached by a young man who said he was of Dutch origin and that his name was Eddy. He was interested in comparing ivory prices. I had sent him a picture with my camera of this auction slip. After that I had no more news. A few weeks later he offered me some red coral and a rhinoceros horn as well as some furniture and a statue. But I was not interested." Mr. Ta varied his version of events slightly the next day by claiming that he had on his person the auction slip from Cannes Enchères and that Eddy took a picture of it using his phone. "I don't know why he showed this document when he was checked in Poitiers, because it wasn't the tusks that matched. Those tusks are still in Cannes, I didn't have time to go get them." David Ta does not know that Alexandre Debussy affirmed in front of the investigators that these tusks had been taken, with a voucher for their removal by one of his friends.

During his 48-hours in custody, Mr. Ta also pretended not to know the name of an assistant auctioneer at Tessier-Sarrou with whom he conversed by e-mail, who addressed him informally with "tu," who tried to reach him "in complete confidentiality." Above all, she counted on him to go urgently to a gas station or a tobacco shop to buy 1,500 € in PCS Mastercard prepaid payment coupons and to send him the activation codes, in short, a financial transaction that occurred without any trace. The Tessier-Sarrou firm notably conducted a remarkable sale of "Asian Art" in December 2014 including 3 rhinoceros horn libation cups and various ivory objects. Neither Cannes Enchères nor Tessier-Sarrou will be worried during the rest of the proceedings.

It is different for Mr. Ta, David by his French first name, Vi Dan by his Vietnamese first name, who was already convicted in 2012 for receiving property derived from an aggravated theft. He was placed in pre-trial detention and imprisoned on May 27, 2016 at 7:10 p.m. in the prison of Rennes-Vézin le Coquet for possession and trafficking of ivory as well as associating with criminals. In vain, he protests, "It was not I who killed the elephants."

Part 2 in the next issue of "On the Trail."



ROBIN DES BOIS