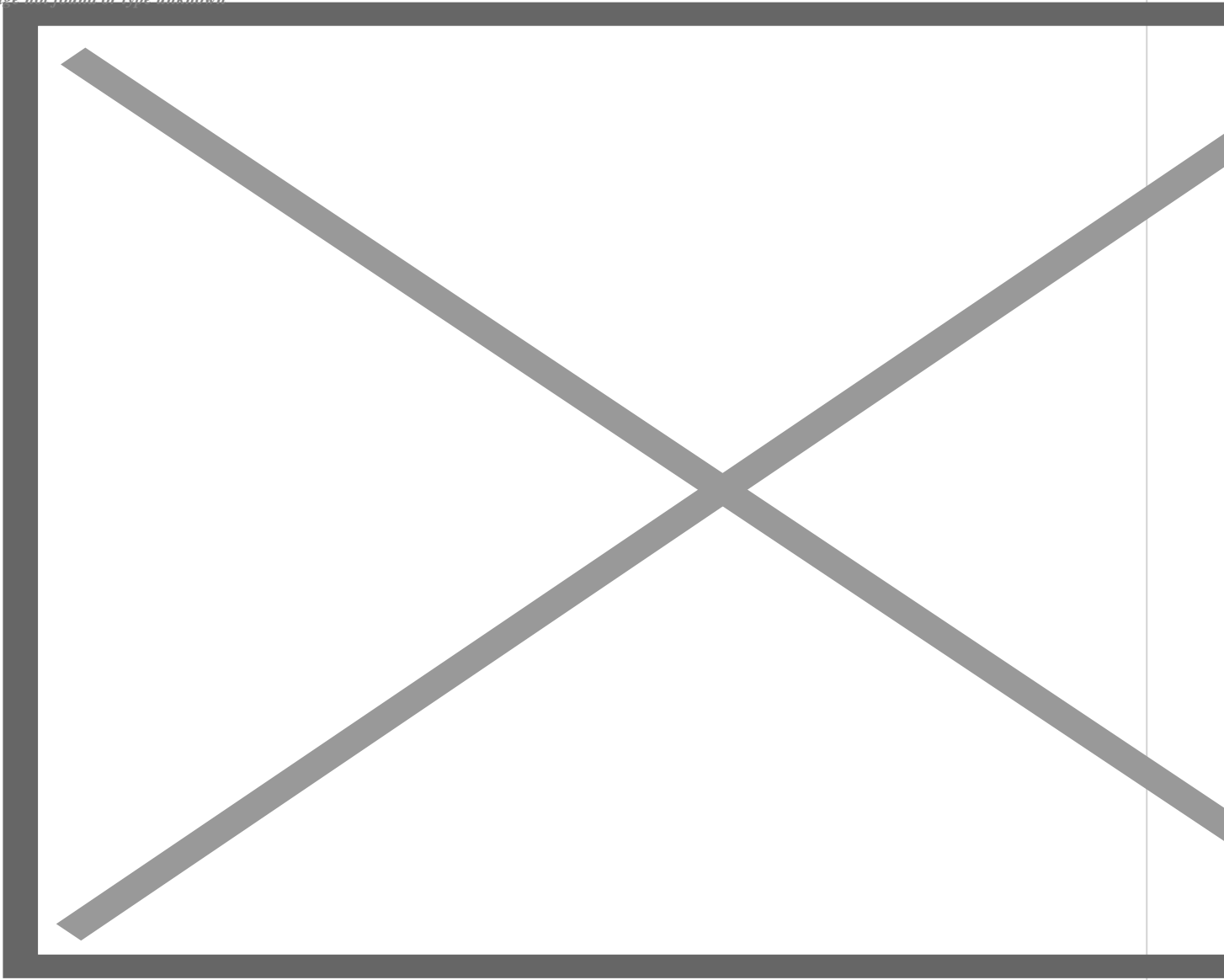


U.S. to return 17,000 artifacts stolen from Iraq

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The Gilgamesh Tablet, which features inscriptions in Sumerian, is considered one of the world's oldest religious texts [File: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement-ICE via AP]

Washington, September 23 (RHC)-- The U.S. will return a 3,500-year-old clay tablet previously owned by craft retail chain Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. to Iraq after the Justice Department concluded it was stolen around the start of the Gulf War and sold illegally in the U.S. market.

The Gilgamesh Tablet, which features inscriptions in Sumerian, is considered one of the world's oldest religious texts. In 2014, Hobby Lobby bought the item for \$1.67 million to display it at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, which was started by the retailer's billionaire founder and chief executive officer, David Green.

The DOJ said in July that the item, which was seized from the museum in 2019 after concluding it entered in the U.S. "contrary to federal law," would be returned along with about 17,000 artifacts believed to have been taken from Iraq in recent decades. It's estimated that the tablet was looted from an Iraqi museum in 1990 and introduced into the U.S. in 2007.

The tablet is scheduled to be returned to Iraq at a Thursday ceremony at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, according to Unesco. Hobby Lobby didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Hobby Lobby, which has collected biblical artifacts for more than a decade, agreed in 2017 to forfeit thousands of illegally imported items and pay a \$3 million fine under a settlement with the DOJ.

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