
Los Angeles Times

Thursday, September 11, 2008

A LIFE IN SHARDS

A passion for art, a perilous pursuit

*** Scholar's quest leads through war, addiction and hardship to arrest.**

Series: A LIFE IN SHARDS. First of three parts. Friday: Trauma and revival.

Home Edition, Main News, Page A-1

Metro Desk

35 inches; 1474 words

Type of Material: Profile; Series

By Jason Felch, Times Staff Writer

"I'm being arrested."

Roxanna Brown, a renowned expert in Southeast Asian ceramics, was whispering into the hotel telephone.

Downstairs in the lobby, her host, University of Washington professor Bill Lavelly, didn't know what to do. He had flown Brown, a 62-year-old museum director, in from Bangkok to give a lecture at an academic conference in Seattle.

Lavelly paced the lobby for 10 minutes before going up to Brown's room and knocking tentatively on her door. A few minutes later, she emerged, flanked by four federal agents.

She walked stiffly with a cane, limping because of a prosthetic right leg. She looked haggard and frail, Lavelly thought. She'd obviously been crying.

"I wish I could explain," Brown stammered as she was led to the elevator that afternoon in May. "It's about that thing in Los Angeles. I made a mistake. . . . I faxed my signature."

Recalling the episode two months later, Lavelly said he'd had no idea what she was talking about. As Brown was ushered into the elevator, he asked if there was anything he could do.

"I guess not," Brown replied. "Well, maybe there is. . . ."

Before she could finish, the elevator doors closed.

It was the last time any of Brown's colleagues would see her alive.

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Art world stunned

The arrest of Roxanna Brown, and her subsequent death in prison, shocked the world of ancient art, where she had come to be seen as one of the world's foremost authorities on Thai ceramics.

To those who knew her, it made no sense that she should be accused, much less jailed, in an international smuggling investigation that had led to raids of respected museums in Southern California and beyond. Her life had been dedicated to studying and protecting the treasures of long-gone Southeast Asian cultures.

Even as a young girl growing up on a chicken farm in Illinois, she once told her older brother Fred, "I feel like I must have lived in Asia in another lifetime."

At Columbia University, she studied journalism but was fascinated by a class in Asian art. Virtually nothing was known about Southeast Asian ceramics. Brown thought her degree might help get her overseas to look at kiln sites.

After graduating in 1968, Brown rode her motorcycle from New York to Chicago, then hitched rides with motorcycle gangs to California. There she boarded a plane for Australia, bound for Southeast Asia, determined to follow her childhood intuition.

By December, the 22-year-old Brown was freelancing in Vietnam, one of the youngest credentialed reporters of the war. It was her first visit to Asia, but she felt as though she were home.

Most other journalists lived in Saigon apartments. Brown moved in with a Vietnamese family in a humble neighborhood. They taught her the language and local customs, and she contributed money when she could. It became a lifelong friendship.

Attractive and extremely bright, Brown fell in with a group of journalists now famous for covering the war. She briefly dated Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer David Hume Kennerly, was friends with actor-photojournalist Sean Flynn (son of Errol) and hung out with correspondents Peter Arnett and David Halberstam, her brother said.

"I reestablished my love for motorcycling after borrowing her 100-cc bike," said Ted Koppel in a recent interview.

In March 1969, when the U.S. began a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia, Brown was part of the gaggle of young freelancers who hung around the Hotel Le Royal in Phnom Penh in the evenings, looking for work, recalled Koppel, then a 29-year-old war correspondent for ABC News.

But from the start, covering the war was a way for Brown to fund her true passion: sifting through pottery shards at the ancient kiln sites that dotted the Vietnamese countryside. She'd work a few days to file a story, then hop on her motorcycle and drive across the war-torn region looking for remnants of its ancient ceramics trade.

"She had a lot more guts than I did," Kennerly said.

When the North Vietnamese army rolled across the demilitarized zone during an offensive in April 1972, the residents of Hue fled south carrying their children in their arms and their belongings on bamboo poles. South Vietnamese military trucks in full retreat clogged the main highway.

Weaving northward through the chaos on her motorbike was a beautiful 26-year-old American woman in fatigues and a floppy hat, recalled former Time magazine correspondent David DeVoss.

DeVoss flagged Brown down. Did she know she was headed for danger?

"I'm going to the Citadel," Brown said with cool determination, referring to the ancient imperial palace in Hue. "I need to retrieve some historical records and artifacts there before they're lost."

DeVoss, expecting some reckless war junkie, was stunned by Brown's poise. "She was calm and had a clear purpose, and around her everything was just falling apart," he recalled in a recent interview.

She had a lighter side as well. The two became friends, and when DeVoss was seriously wounded in a mortar attack weeks later, Brown visited him at the field hospital. Seeing that his arms were immobilized, she teasingly lifted his bed clothes to peek at his naked body. "It was one of those funny wartime situations," DeVoss said. "Let's laugh and have a good time 'cause tomorrow we may die."

By then, Brown was living in Singapore. She had started work on a master's degree at the University of Singapore, studying under William Willets, a British expert on Asian art. A year later, she moved to London, where she studied Vietnamese and finished her master's at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

In 1977, Brown published her first book, "The Ceramics of South East Asia: Their Dating and Identification." It became the bible of a budding field. Her expertise made her invaluable to private collectors, who began flying her around the world to appraise their ceramics, said Patricia Cheeseman, a longtime friend and fellow expatriate who met Brown in Laos in 1973.

For a time, Brown lived in Hong Kong, where she worked as an assistant editor for the prestigious magazine Arts in Asia and launched an international Asian antiques fair, which allowed her to study thousands of rare ceramics.

"Roxanna could have gone on in that world and become very rich, but the jungles of Asia were crying out to her,

and she gave up the high life," Cheeseman said.

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'In over her head'

There was another reason for Brown to leave Hong Kong in 1979, her family says. Like many young Americans in Southeast Asia at the time, she'd experimented with drugs. But Brown "got in over her head," said her cousin Karen Lindner.

She was addicted to opium.

Just as her promising antiques business was getting off the ground, the drugs got out of control.

Her friends turned her in to Hong Kong authorities, who detained her briefly and ordered her to leave the country, her brother Fred said.

"I can't explain even to myself how I've made such a mess of it," Brown wrote to her mother in July 1979. "I guess I've never really had faith in myself -- I've always felt like I bluffed people into thinking I was clever or interesting or strong -- and always been afraid to be found out."

Hoping to turn her life around, Brown went to live for several months in a Buddhist wat, or monastery, in Thailand.

There a young Thai monk, many years her junior, cared for her during her withdrawal and slow recuperation. The two fell in love. She felt he'd saved her life, Brown's cousin Lindner said. He admired her work to preserve Thai culture.

When "Joe" Ngerntongdee completed his service in the monastery, the two moved to his family home in a slum outside Bangkok, settling in a wooden house on stilts with no electricity, said Lindner, who visited several times.

Whenever Brown got a call on the village's single phone, it seemed the entire population would gather to watch.

The couple married in 1980 in a traditional Thai ceremony. Joe's family came to barter for Roxanna's hand. Lindner, Brown's only relative present, agreed to give her away for a pair of flip-flops. Keyes Beech, the Los Angeles Times' Bangkok bureau chief and Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent, stood in for Brown's father.

Monks in saffron robes chanted for hours in exchange for cigarettes, then bound Joe and Roxanna's heads and hands with ceremonial ribbon. The Western guests struggled to sit cross-legged on the wooden floor without pointing their heels toward the other guests, an insult in Thai culture.

Joe's family quickly adopted Roxanna as one of their own. His mother taught Roxanna to cook Thai specialties, and Roxanna learned to speak both formal and street Thai fluently.

Two years later, Brown gave birth to a son. She and Joe named him Taweessin "Jaime" Ngerntongdee. Most of her friends were Thai, and, despite her impressive reputation as a scholar, she lived simply on money scraped together teaching English and editing a local magazine.

Her lifestyle shocked many in Bangkok's expatriate community, Cheeseman said. But Brown seemed happy, settled.

The accident changed everything.

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jason.felch@latimes.com

Descriptors: BROWN, ROXANNA; SOUTHEAST ASIA; CERAMICS; MUSEUM DIRECTORS; EXPERTS; PRISON DEATHS; SMUGGLING

NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.
[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: FEARLESS: Roxanna Brown covered the Vietnam War, but her main interest was Southeast Asian ceramics.
ID NUMBER:20080911k6mzn5nc
PHOTOGRAPHER:Family Photo



PHOTO: IN 1973: Roxanna Brown in Cambodia with Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer David Hume Kennerly, whom she briefly dated. "She had a lot more guts than I did," Kennerly said of her attitude and actions during the Vietnam War.
ID NUMBER:20080911k6oozunc
PHOTOGRAPHER: Family photograph



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Los Angeles Times

Friday, September 12, 2008

A LIFE IN SHARDS

Helping illuminate art's dark side

* Her career revived, a scholar turns expert and tipster in a smuggling probe.

Series: A Life in Shards. Second of three parts

Home Edition, Main News, Page A-1

Metro Desk

42 inches; 1705 words

Type of Material: Series; Profile

By Jason Felch, Times Staff Writer

Roxanna Brown never saw the car that hit her.

The 36-year-old expert in Southeast Asian art was pulling her motorcycle out of a parking lot in Bangkok when the vehicle knocked her onto a busy road.

There she was repeatedly crushed under the wheels of a multi-ton rice truck. Then the truck driver backed up, apparently intending to roll over her again.

He was trying to avoid a lawsuit by finishing her off, she would later tell friends, but passersby pulled her out of the way.

The 1982 accident was the latest turn in an exotic life tinged by hardship. Brown had gone from Illinois farm girl to Vietnam War correspondent to leading authority on ancient ceramics. But her promising career had been sidetracked by an addiction to opium. While recovering in a Buddhist monastery, she'd fallen in love with a young Thai monk and settled in his poor village near Bangkok with their 1-year-old son.

Now she lay in the road with her legs, pelvis and internal organs crushed, her body burned from being dragged across asphalt.

With no insurance or savings, she was taken to a hospital with minimal sanitation. As she drifted in and out of consciousness, her mother, who had flown in from Illinois, ran daily to a pharmacy. The hospital had no medication.

Brown's right leg was partially amputated. Infections then forced doctors to cut farther and farther up the limb until all that was left was a stump.

Unable to speak, she wrote a note to her mother: "I am willing myself to die."

It would be six months until Brown was well enough to fly to Illinois, three years until she regained her health. For the rest of her life, she suffered terrible pain, migraines and buzzing in her ears, friends said.

"She came out of it literally flat," recalled Brown's longtime friend and fellow expatriate Patricia Cheeseman, who had met Brown in Laos in the 1970s. "She retained that flatness for years, and was covered in scars."

Brown returned to Thailand with her son, only to have her husband leave her.

"He wasn't able to tolerate looking at her with one leg," said Brown's cousin Karen Lindner, who visited several times. "It's a shameful thing there."

Brown moved to Chiang Mai, the largest city in northern Thailand. As a disabled single mother, she found daily life a struggle.

A pioneer in her field, she earned less than \$200 a month teaching about ancient ceramics at Chiang Mai University, friends said. In the evenings, she worked at a small bar she had bought for extra income. It was called the Hard Rock Cafe -- though it was not part of the famous franchise, as she had been told when buying it.

She had a poorly fitting prosthetic leg, friends say, and was in and out of the hospital with infections.

Brown spent much of the next decade in pain, depressed and directionless.

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Reviving a career

In the mid-1990s, as interest in Asian art surged in the U.S., Brown moved to Los Angeles, determined to revive her academic career.

She got a better-fitting prosthetic leg, a job as a medical transcriptionist to pay the bills and work doing art appraisals on the side.

Friends say Brown had begun to worry about money -- about being able to pay for college for her teenage son, who had stayed in Bangkok with relatives, and about growing older with no assets or savings.

With the encouragement of her longtime friend Robert Brown, a Southeast Asia scholar at UCLA (and no relation), Roxanna enrolled in the university's doctoral program at the age of 53.

Her focus was the Ming Gap, a little-studied period of 300 years when China blocked exports of its ceramics, fueling a boom in production across Southeast Asia. Brown's analysis of ceramics recovered from shipwrecks revolutionized the understanding of trade patterns in the region, colleagues said.

"We all admired her," said Barbara Gaerlan, assistant director of the Center for Southeast Asian studies at UCLA, "an older woman going back to graduate school with this amazing history."

While at UCLA, Brown fell into a like-minded community of Southeast Asia enthusiasts. They would occasionally gather for Buddhist rituals at the house of Jonathan and Cari Markell, owners of Silk Roads Gallery, a high-end home decor store on La Brea Avenue.

Among the guests were local museum officials, including Robert Brown, who became curator of Southeast Asian art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2000, and David Kamansky, director emeritus of the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena.

Another local Thai enthusiast was Robert Olson, a retired steelworker who had been importing ancient ceramics, bronze jewelry and stone tools since the 1980s. Olson brought in shipping containers filled with antiquities, which he sold from an Anaheim warehouse. He specialized in objects from Ban Chiang, a world heritage site in northeastern Thailand.

Roxanna Brown heard about Olson soon after she started at UCLA. Robert Brown had once taken his graduate students to study objects at the importer's warehouse, Olson has said. Kamansky says he visited the warehouse with Robert Brown while considering a joint exhibition of Olson's Thai material.

Roxanna Brown also visited Olson's warehouse several times. She saw remarkable things -- several bronze baskets, for instance, when only a few of that type were known to exist in the world, according to statements later attributed to her in federal affidavits.

Olson insisted to her that the antiquities had been imported legally. But he also chortled about getting them past Thai and U.S. customs officials, she later told authorities.

Brown was confident they had been smuggled out of Thailand, according to affidavits later filed by federal investigators.

At times, evidence of grave robbing was obvious. Brown told authorities some of Olson's ancient bronze bracelets were still attached to human arm bones.

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Into the investigation

In 2002, a federal agent approached Roxanna Brown. He was investigating what appeared to be looted Southeast Asian antiquities and wanted Brown's expert advice.

She told the agent that the objects he asked about had probably been brought into the country by Olson, whom she described as the largest and perhaps only commercial importer of this kind in the country, according to a search warrant affidavit filed in July. She offered to help the agent further, saying she "firmly believed efforts should be made to stop archaeological looting" and "felt Olson and others should be held accountable."

For two years, from 2002 to 2004, Brown acted as an expert and occasional tipster for the government, the federal documents show. When asked to testify against Olson, however, she balked.

She offered a curious explanation: She had once brokered a deal between Olson and an antiquities dealer in Thailand involving bronze bells that the dealer had smuggled out of Cambodia. She did so, she told authorities, only to stop the cash-strapped dealer from selling off an even larger cache of "high quality" Thai antiquities.

In 2004, Brown received her doctorate and returned to Thailand, eager to embrace new opportunities.

After the wealthy founder of Bangkok University asked her to review his ceramics collection, Brown persuaded him to create a museum and name her director. She also began advising a Cambodian project near the ruins of Angkor Wat that trained locals to make pottery for sale as an alternative to looting.

"She cared very deeply about the preservation of antiquities in their home locations," said photographer David Hume Kennerly, an old friend. "She didn't want to see stuff shipped off around the world."

As Brown pursued her passion in Thailand, the smuggling investigation in the United States mushroomed.

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Undercover operation

In the years since meeting with Brown, the federal agent had been working undercover as "Tom Hoyt," a wealthy technology entrepreneur interested in Asian art -- and tax breaks.

In fact, Hoyt worked for the National Park Service, where he'd spent 10 years going undercover at auctions, swap meets and art galleries in search of smuggled artifacts. While investigating the trade in Native American and pre-Colombian objects, he came across what appeared to be a major pipeline of looted Southeast Asian antiquities into the Los Angeles area, according to search warrant affidavits filed in January.

The court documents describe his penetration of the alleged smuggling and tax-fraud ring as follows:

Hoyt gained Olson's confidence and began buying Thai antiquities from him. The importer described his business in detail as the agent secretly recorded him.

Eventually, Olson introduced Hoyt to the Markells, who selected objects from Olson's warehouse and helped Hoyt donate them to local museums. In Hoyt's presence, Jonathan Markell created appraisals that inflated the value of the objects to get the donor a tax write-off.

To give legitimacy to the appraisals, he was using the electronic signature of a highly regarded expert: Roxanna Brown.

Brown was portrayed in the January affidavits as a victim of the scheme, taken advantage of by her friends the Markells, who allegedly used her signature without her knowledge.

In this and other instances, Hoyt donated the over-valued objects to four Southern California museums, some of whose staff accepted them even though they had reason to suspect their illicit origins, the affidavits allege.

In January 2008, hundreds of federal agents launched coordinated raids on LACMA, the Pacific Asia Museum, the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana and the Mingei Museum in San Diego, plus nine other locations in California and Illinois.

The agents seized thousands of records and suspect antiquities. No arrests were made at the time. Olson denies any wrongdoing and the Markells through their attorney have declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

Among the records seized from Olson, the alleged smuggler, was a file simply labeled "Roxanna."

Its contents suggested an entirely different side to Roxanna Brown.

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jason.felch@latimes.com

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About this series

A life in shards

Thursday, Chapter 1: In May, respected Southeast Asia antiquities scholar Roxanna Brown is arrested in Seattle in a smuggling probe and dies in custody. It is a remarkable turn in a life that began on an Illinois farm and took her from the jungles of Vietnam to a Thai monastery and a slum near Bangkok.

Today, Chapter 2: A 1982 accident leads to a decade of pain and emotional trauma. Brown enters a doctoral program at UCLA, where a federal agent taps her to help with a major smuggling probe.

Saturday, Chapter 3: After raids of Southland art museums, investigators focus on Brown as a participant in the scheme she had been helping them unravel.

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On latimes.com

See photos, Chapter 1 and a letter Brown sent her mother at latimes.com/roxanna.

Descriptors: BROWN, ROXANNA; SOUTHEAST ASIA; ART THEFTS; ANTIQUES; SMUGGLING; MUSEUMS; SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.
[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: PAIR: Roxanna Brown, with son Jaime, struggled to get by in Thailand. She moved to L.A. in the mid-'90s to revive her career.

ID NUMBER:20080912k6mzm2nc

PHOTOGRAPHER:Family photograph



PHOTO: ON SITE: Roxanna Brown at a Southeast Asian dig in the mid-1990s. While at UCLA working on her doctorate, Brown fell into a community of fellow enthusiasts about the region, including an importer later targeted in a federal investigation.

ID NUMBER:20080912k6mznync

PHOTOGRAPHER: Family photograph



PHOTO: COPING: Brown was often in pain after her accident, but had a motorcycle fitted with a third wheel so she could take Jaime to school.

ID NUMBER:20080912k6p0t9nc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Family photograph



[A01](#)

Los Angeles Times

Saturday, September 13, 2008

A LIFE IN SHARDS

A stunning reversal of fortune

* **Once an aid in a smuggling probe, a respected ceramics expert is arrested as a suspect.**

Series: A Life in Shards. Third of three parts

Home Edition, California, Page B-1

Metro Desk

43 inches; 1789 words

Type of Material: Series; Infobox

By Jason Felch, Times Staff Writer

On a March visit to the United States from her adopted home in Thailand, antiquities scholar Roxanna Brown met her brother for lunch in Santa Monica.

Roxanna was broke, Fred Brown recalled. She seemed nervous.

For years, she'd chosen to live on a modest salary in a village outside Bangkok, despite her reputation as one of the world's leading experts on Southeast Asian ceramics. Now 61, she said she could no longer afford the \$400 a month she'd been sending to support their 90-year-old mother.

She had her suitcase in the back of her car and was uncertain where she would be sleeping that night, but told her brother she would manage, he said.

Weighing heavily on her mind was a federal smuggling investigation that had made front-page news in Thailand and the U.S.

In January, hundreds of agents had launched coordinated raids on four Southern California museums and other places in California and Illinois. According to federal search warrant affidavits filed at the time, they were looking for evidence of an alleged smuggling pipeline carrying looted Thai antiquities into the U.S. Some of those objects were appraised at inflated values and donated to museums for fraudulent tax write-offs, investigators believed.

Several years before, Roxanna Brown had helped the investigators as an expert and tipster. She knew many of the people named in the affidavits.

There was Robert Olson, referred to in the affidavits as "the smuggler," in whose warehouse Brown said she had seen human arm bones strung with ancient bronze bracelets.

There were her friends Jonathan and Cari Markell, Asian art dealers in Los Angeles who were alleged to have been at the center of the tax scheme.

And there were her colleagues at local museums, some of whom allegedly turned a blind eye to donations of looted antiquities, according to federal affidavits.

No one had been charged with a crime, but now investigators were trying to reach Brown again -- this time with questions about inflated appraisals that bore her signature.

She confided to her brother that she had allowed the Markells to use her electronic signature on one appraisal that might have been overvalued. Apparently they had used it on other appraisals, but she insisted it was without her permission, Fred Brown said.

"Fred, I have no money. If I were really doing this, wouldn't I have money?" her brother recalled Roxanna saying. "I don't know why they are bothering me with something so small. If they harass me, they're going to ruin my name, and that's all I have."

Soon after, Brown cut her trip short and flew back to Thailand.

The Roxanna file

As federal investigators sorted through the massive haul of records they had seized in January, they came across an intriguing file among the documents taken from Olson.

It was labeled simply: "Roxanna."

Inside were handwritten notes and typed lists in which Brown offered to sell Olson dozens of Thai vessels and other antiquities, according to a search warrant affidavit filed in July.

Investigators now believed that their onetime expert was part of the scheme she had helped them unravel -- that she had peddled the very objects she spent her career protecting.

In one undated document, Brown offered to sell Olson ancient bronze bracelets, Neolithic stone tools and Thai ceramics from "burial sites on the Burmese border," according to copies of the correspondence attached to the July affidavit.

In an e-mail dated April 2002 that bears her name, she confirmed that she had received \$14,000 in cash from Olson for a prehistoric bronze. Two months later, another e-mail from Brown advised Olson's grandson of a Thai bank account to which additional money could be sent.

Brown's role in the alleged scheme had continued even after she had helped investigators uncover it, the correspondence suggests.

Agents found an e-mail from June 2006, allegedly an exchange between Brown and Jonathan Markell, in which the scholar provided her electronic signature for his use on appraisals. In another e-mail exchange from March 2007, Markell asked Brown to sign six to eight blank appraisal forms for future donations and offered the scholar \$300 "for using you, as it were, as the appraiser. . . ."

"If you are nervous about doing this, please realize that the Republicans are still in office, the IRS does not have enough personnel to review small-time appraisals and the appraisals are very well written and will never be challenged," Markell wrote, according to a copy of the e-mail filed with the affidavit.

The documents indicate that Brown responded via e-mail the same day: "No problem! I am delighted to be your partner in this."

Confronted at hotel

On Thursday, May 8, Brown flew to the U.S. to give a lecture at the University of Washington.

She was met by professor Bill Lavelly, her host, who dropped her at Seattle's Watertown Hotel with plans to meet Friday evening for dinner.

On Friday afternoon, the federal agent she had helped four years earlier, accompanied by three other investigators, confronted Brown in her hotel room, according to interviews and the July affidavit.

Their interview is described in the affidavit as follows:

Brown initially denied selling objects to Olson or providing recent appraisals to the Markells.

Then, as the investigators confronted her with their evidence, her story changed. She said she had forgotten about Olson's \$14,000 payment for antiquities and admitted signing blank appraisals for the Markells.

She also acknowledged bringing one Thai and two Burmese Buddha images into the U.S. for the Markells. Because she was a Buddhist, she felt she did not need government permission, she said.

Investigators had been questioning Brown for four hours when Lavelly called up to her room from the hotel lobby. After waiting a few minutes, he came upstairs and knocked on her door.

Federal agents soon emerged with Brown and escorted her to the elevator as her bewildered host looked on.

"It's about that thing in Los Angeles," Lavelly recalled her saying before the elevator doors shut. "I made a

mistake. . . . I faxed my signature."

Brown was arrested and taken to a federal detention center near Seattle's airport. That afternoon, a Los Angeles grand jury had indicted her on a single count of wire fraud for allowing Jonathan Markell to use her signature on an inflated appraisal.

The Markells have declined to comment through their attorney, citing the ongoing investigation. The alleged smuggler, Olson, has denied wrongdoing.

That weekend in prison, Brown began to suffer from stomach problems. By Monday, she was throwing up as she met with her court-appointed public defender, Michael Filipovic, the attorney recalled.

When he came back later that morning, Brown was sick again with uncontrolled diarrhea. The federal marshals decided she was too ill to attend her court appearance that afternoon, Filipovic said.

The lawyer said he spoke briefly with Joseph Johns, the Los Angeles prosecutor in charge of Brown's case, who surprised him by saying more charges would be coming. If convicted of them all, Brown faced 36 to 56 months in prison.

Johns would not withdraw the government's request for Brown's detention, Filipovic recalls, but said that once she got to Los Angeles, "we probably won't object to her being released on home detention."

Johns declined to comment for this story because of pending civil litigation and the ongoing criminal investigation.

In court the next day, at a brief hearing to determine if she could be released on bail, Brown was shaky and in a wheelchair, but looked slightly better, Filipovic said.

Prosecutors described her as a flight risk and danger to the community. Filipovic argued that she had offered to turn in her Thai and American passports and was both ill and handicapped from a long-ago accident.

"As someone said to me, 'Where's she gonna run?' " Filipovic said. "She's got one leg!"

Rather than risk losing, Filipovic asked for a one-day delay while the court confirmed that there was someone in Los Angeles who could take Brown in.

"I wish I maybe asked her some more questions and delved a little deeper," he said in a recent interview.

Later, it would be determined that Brown had suffered a perforated ulcer. The contents of her digestive tract were emptying into the abdomen, causing an acute infection -- a condition that generally requires immediate surgery.

According to a lawsuit filed by Brown's family, inmates near her cell told a prison guard that she had been vomiting something that "smelled like excrement." The guard did not respond, the suit alleges, and inmates carried Brown to a shower.

After the 10 p.m. lockdown, inmates allegedly heard Brown call for help. Some began to pray for her.

A guard told Brown she would have to wait until morning for medical attention, the suit says. Prison officials declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Roxanna Brown died about 2:30 a.m.. Her final moments were spent in agony, the lawsuit alleges, "laying on the floor of her cell, in her own filth."

Hundreds of supporters

Brown's arrest and death stunned and outraged those who had known her throughout her life -- her family in the Midwest, Vietnam War journalists, families in Southeast Asia who had adopted her and Asia scholars who considered her a colleague.

The single criminal charge leveled against her, which was dropped immediately after her death, seemed to contradict everything these people knew about a woman who had chosen a simple life and worked doggedly to protect Asian antiquities.

"It is not only the cruelty of Roxanna's incarceration we seek to redress, but the slur cast upon her name by the accusations that prompted her arrest," said a petition to federal authorities signed soon after her death by hundreds of Brown's friends and colleagues in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the United States.

"For a scholar of such integrity, who tirelessly sought to raise the level of ethical practice in the trade in ceramics, it is a cruel irony that her reputation has been thus tainted."

Now, as new details of Brown's role in the alleged scheme come to light, her accusers and admirers are left to sift through the shards of her life.

Whatever emerges from the lawsuit or criminal proceedings, it will be difficult to piece them together smoothly into a single vessel.

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jason.felch@latimes.com

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

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On latimes.com

See photos, Chapters 1 and 2, a court affidavit, alleged handwritten notes and e-mail messages at latimes.com/roxanna.

Descriptors: BROWN, ROXANNA; ART THEFTS; SMUGGLING; INVESTIGATIONS; PRISON DEATHS

NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: UPSET: Roxanna Brown was nervous and worried at this lunch in March with brother Fred.

ID NUMBER:20080913k6mzo8nc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Family photo

PHOTO: VISITING: Roxanna Brown at the Seattle Asian Art Museum hours before her arrest. She died in custody days later.

ID NUMBER:20080913k6mzosnc



PHOTOGRAPHER: Family photo



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