

# Dossier “Heritage & illicit trade”

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## Scope

This dossier on cultural heritage and illicit trade takes a broader look at one of the largest international crime-areas.

Different experts in the field, Dr. Neil Brodie, Dr. Susan Legene, Mr. John Critchley, Mr. Jos van Beurden and others, share their ideas and thoughts about the reasons, the effects of these crimes and on possible solutions.

A selection of websites and library resources on the topic is presented.

## In-Depth

### **Demand and supply**

Today, there is a large and growing trade in archaeological and ethnographic objects that can be bought and sold in most countries of the world as ‘art’. Many end up in the museums and private collections of North America, Europe and Japan.

### **Worldwide problem**

The geographical range of the trade has expanded greatly over the past few decades because during that time the cost of travel has dropped enormously and political barriers have fallen. Thus cultural sites in the Sahara, the Himalayas and the Amazonian rainforest are no longer safe because they are no longer inaccessible. The political reforms that have swept through the former communist bloc have also opened countries there to the trade.



### **International conventions**

There are several international conventions and agreements that have been drafted to stop the trade in illegally-acquired cultural objects. The most important is the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which has been ratified by 107 countries.

### **Role of museums**

Museums have the power to make or break the trade. This is for three reasons. First, by acquiring unprovenanced objects through gift or through purchase they create a demand. Second, by acquiring unprovenanced objects they also set an example, and send a clear signal to private collectors that it is an acceptable practice. Finally, by displaying archaeological objects as treasures or great works of art, they increase their desirability, and again enhance demand. Thus museum practice can actively promote or discourage the market.

### **Cause of cultural crimes**

In many countries, the fundamental cause of looting is poverty. Poor farmers can earn more from digging up archaeological sites or stealing from monuments than they can from the sale of crops. In times of war, too, archaeological sites and museums are a ready source of income for people whose livelihoods have been destroyed, though sometimes there are more sinister motives – the money earned from the sale of looted material can be used to keep armed militia in the field.

### **Solution**

So the battle to stop the looting of cultural sites proceeds on two fronts. If collectors and museums in the West can be persuaded that it is not fashionable or clever to buy unprovenanced objects, then demand will shrive. If people living in the vicinity of sites are offered realistic subsistence options, then looting will stop and supply will dry up.

Respected experts in the field share their views, case studies and insight in the different aspects of cultural crimes. We are very much interested in more case studies or articles. If you would like to contribute, please contact the editor of this special: Drs Daan van Dartel ([d.v.dartel@kit.nl](mailto:d.v.dartel@kit.nl))

### **Documents**

- [Book and Map Security by Mr. John Critchley](#)
- [Information for travellers \(in Dutch\) by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science](#)
- [Tainted Temple Clock of Cambodia by drs. Jos van Beurden](#)
- [Theft, the Internet and Museum Objects: Threats and Opportunities. By Ton Cremers](#)

## KIT's Involvement

This Dossier of the Royal Tropical Institute about the protection of cultural heritage and the problems of illegal excavations and illicit trade is not just a matter of providing information. It is also closely related to the work of both the Institute's Tropenmuseum and the Central Library. Museum and library keep objects and books that have been acquired over the past 150 years. They are documented and made accessible for research and exhibitions. Besides these collections of books, images and objects form the starting point for many forms of collaboration with partners in the Netherlands and all over the world. This raises questions about the interpretation and legitimacy of the historical collections, current acquisition policies, and support for the heritage sector in 'source' countries for the illicit traffic.



### **Ethnographic collections**

The Tropenmuseum and the Central Library of the Royal Tropical Institute were founded in 1864, as the Colonial Museum. The core of the historical collections were brought together as an aspect of Dutch colonialism in the East Indies and the West Indies. The wish to 'learn' and the wish to 'control' went together, and as a result many precious objects, often connected to religion, rituals, and power, were brought to the Netherlands. The history of these objects, their provenance and the meaning attached to them in former times, are well documented, supported by both the library collection and the historical photographs and maps. Today the institute sees it as a priority, to make the objects and books accessible for anyone who wants study and see them, either through the internet, or 'life' in Amsterdam. This accessibility is a precondition to have the collections play their role as historical and cultural sources of the past -- as common heritage.

Such historical ethnographic collections rooted in the colonial past are not uncontested, and in some cases this leads to discussions about restitution, repatriation, exchange, duplication or other forms of change in ownership. The Royal Tropical Institute approaches these issues with an open mind. Our claim that these collections are a mutual heritage, or even belong to world heritage, should be meaningless, if in concrete cases, we would not enter into a debate. For this debate, the permanent exhibitions in the museum form the stage.

### **Acquisition policies**

The Tropenmuseum is not the only ethnographic museum in the Netherlands that tries to further the case of the struggle against illicit traffic in ethnographic objects and archaeological finds. Together with the six other Dutch ethnographic museums, organized in the [Stichting Volkenkundige Collectie Nederland](#), it has established an ethical committee. This committee supervises the collection policies of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, the Museum of World Cultures in Rotterdam, Museum Nusantara in Delft, Africa Museum in Berg en Dal, Museon in The Hague, Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the ethnographic university collections in Groningen en Nijmegen. The ethical committee controls acquisition and loan policies of these museums. It sees to it that no object without a proper provenance which proves that the object has been outside the country of origin prior to 1970 or is exported with a licence, is acquired or temporarily put on display by one of these museums. Besides, this committee advises on matters related to restitution as well as the dealing with the museum collections of human remains.

## Protection of collections

Listing and inventoring objects is one of the best methods to prevent theft and illicit export from the source country. Therefore the Tropenmuseum supports museums in the South to improve the collection registration by entering objects and images in a computerized documentation system. This system starts from the so-called Object ID features, developed by the Getty Institute. Object ID makes sure that the ten key characteristics of an object are registered, together with a digital photograph. Such a registration of vulnerable objects allows a museum, in case of theft, to inform the police, customs, and Interpol or Scotland Yard, and to try and make it difficult for dealers to trade the object concerned.

This is only one tool in the struggle against illicit trade of objects of art, ethnography and archaeology. However, strengthening the museum infrastructure in countries that face serious illegal export, may help to better protect the collections. The Tropenmuseum approach is described in the 2005 bulletin by Jos van Beurden, *Partnerships in cultural heritage. The international projects of KIT Tropenmuseum.*

## Publications

- [Goden, graven en grenzen](#)
- [A Guide to Japanese Art Collections in the UK](#)
- [Bulletin 364 - Partnerships in cultural heritage](#)

## News

- [Nigeria to retrieve stolen artifacts abroad](#)
- [Press release: The new armed conflict in the Middle East: In addition to the human tragedy, a cultural disaster](#)
- [New Release: A true-life thriller on illicit trade](#)
- [Article on Vigango research](#)
- [Metropolitan to return antiquities to Italy](#)
- [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to Enter into Force on 20 April 2006](#)
- [MUSEUM International \(N°228\)](#)
- [Iraqi cultural institutions and archaeological sites suffered major losses of priceless historical artifacts](#)

## Resources

- [The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum](#)  
Rothfield, L.  
Chicago Press, Chicago | 2009 | 228pp.
- [Is the stealing of cultural objects of others a specific cultural heritage of Europe or is it a universal heritage?](#)  
Opoku, K.  
www.sociolingo.com | February 2008
- [Safe Havens: Art theft from fragile states](#)  
Beurden, J. van  
The Broker | 2008 | 2 | pp. 7-8, 26.
- [Schone Kunsten: Preventieve doorlichting kunst- en antiekhandel](#)  
(this publication is only in Dutch!)  
Bieleman, B., Stop, R. van der, and Naayer, H.  
Intraval | 2007 | 146pp.

- [Transnational crime and the interface between legal and illegal actors the case of the illicit art and antiquities trade](#)  
Tijhuis, A.J.G.  
Wolf Legal Publishers, Oisterwijk | 2006 | 250pp.

## Websites

- [Africom](#)
- [European Heritage Network \(HEREIN\)](#)
- [Museum Security Network](#)
- [IARC \(The Illicit Antiquities Research Centre\)](#)
- [ICOM \(International Council of Museums\)](#)
- [UNESCO's Cultural Heritage Laws Database](#)
- [Weblog Illicit Cultural Property](#)
- [ARCA \(Association for Research into Crimes against Art\)](#)
- [Weblog Tom Flynn on heritage illegal trade and art theft](#)
- [Museum Ethiek](#)
- [Elginism](#)
- [Interpol](#)
- [Cultural Property Advice](#)
- [UNESCO publications](#)
- [Saving Antiquities](#)
- [Haiti: Look back to look ahead](#)
- [Antiquities Wars Recordings](#)
- [Blog: Culture in Peril](#)
- [Combating the Illicit Antiquities Trade](#)
- [National research institute of cultural heritage Korea](#)
- [Blog: looting Matters](#)

## KIT Library Queries

- [Keyword search: Cultural Property Protection](#)
- [Keyword search: Cultural Property Restitution](#)
- [Keyword search: Cultural Property AND museums or art works](#)
- [Keyword search: Lost Treasures of Iraq](#)