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Museums and police in Europe join forces to fight illicit trade in artefacts

European projects are developing new ways to clamp down on international trafficking of cultural goods.

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Lujza Varga is a local player in a European campaign against a global plight: the trafficking of historical objects including artworks.

Varga works for the Hungarian National Museum, which is taking part in an EU-funded project to help police, customs officers, auction houses and institutions like hers identify artefacts that may have been stolen or looted.

Code questions

The project, called AURORA, is looking for ways to label objects so they can be easily identified internationally. Many museums mark items in their collections with codes that are unrecognised elsewhere.

‘If a customs officer sees a code, they will probably know the object belongs to a museum or public institution, but they won’t be able to tell which one,’ said Varga. ‘We are researching to see whether we can create something which is easier to use.’

Because of its geographical location, Hungary is one of the main routes of illicit trafficking from the Middle East to western and northern Europe.

AURORA aims to link artefacts with chemical markers that could be quickly identified by authorities and cultural experts. The markers will be developed using nanotechnologies and be invisible to the human eye. The project runs for three years through 2025.

‘If you can create a system which can be used Europe-wide, for example, then potential buyers or law-enforcement agencies could check the object very easily,’ said Varga, who heads the Department of Project Coordination and Exhibition Management at Hungary’s 221-year-old national museum in the capital Budapest.

Project trio

AURORA is among three EU projects getting underway to develop new methods for pinpointing stolen goods and protecting archaeological sites from looters. The other two initiatives are called ANCHISE and ENIGMA.

All three come in the wake of a December 2022 Action Plan from the European Commission to step up the EU fight against illegal trade in cultural goods.

The plan outlines a range of non-legislative steps that the Commission, EU governments and national customs, police, judicial and cultural authorities can take, including greater sharing of information and more training in the field. The EU’s law-enforcement agency, Europol, has a central role in the whole effort.

Trafficking of cultural goods is the third-largest form of illicit trade in the world, after arms and drugs, according to Corinne Chartrelle, former deputy head of France’s Central Office for the Fight against Illegal Trafficking in Cultural Goods, or OCBC after the French acronym.

In 2020 alone more than 850 000 artefacts were seized globally, with over half being in Europe, estimates the International Criminal Police Organization, or Interpol.

But, because many cases of trafficking go undetected, the real scale is likely to be much larger, according to the European Commission.

Stolen or looted objects can appear on the legal market, often with sophisticated – but false – documentation about their origin.

Terrorism links

For Chartrelle, who is part of ANCHISE, a further source of concern is illegal trade in cultural goods by armed groups.

‘We know that archaeological looting finances terrorism and we cannot dissociate the two,’ she said.

In 2015, when US troops stormed the home of a finance chief of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Syria, they found a large cache of artefacts seized from archaeological sites and museums. They also found documentation showing that Islamic State organised the looting of sites, taxed the proceeds and sold antiquities.

The following year, the US government filed a lawsuit – believed to be the first of its kind – to recover artefacts trafficked by Islamic State. It was a warning to the international art market to guard against inadvertent terrorism financing.

No one knows how much money militant groups make from selling what some call “blood antiquities”. But mounting evidence in recent years of the scale of looting and trafficking has served as an alert to authorities.

‘There is very strong demand for archaeological artefacts because a massive number of museums are opening in Asia and the Middle East, which naturally need objects,’ said Chartrelle.

Looting hotspots

Looting is a major challenge because artefacts are excavated and removed before archaeologists know of their existence. They’re not recorded in any database and can’t be reported stolen.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) publishes Red Lists of the types of objects that may be taken from looting hotspots that include Afghanistan, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Libya, Mexico, Syria and Ukraine.

Researchers at the French National School for the Police, where Chartrelle is now based, are expanding a tool called Arte-Fact that they first developed to identify stolen and looted objects under an earlier project.

A photo of an item is uploaded into a mobile phone application, which checks the image against national and international databases of stolen goods.

ANCHISE, which began in February and runs until early 2026, will incorporate artefacts on ICOM’s Red Lists.

‘It will help identify looted objects,’ said Chartrelle. ‘It will not be 100%, but it will alert an officer that the object needs investigation.’

The app will also suggest the best experts to contact about that item.

The primary way to stop looting is to clamp down on sales, according to Chartrelle. This would curb the demand, a step that in turn would reduce the robbery.

‘To do that, we must be able to identify these objects rapidly when they appear for sale in auction houses or online,’ said Chartrelle.

Database scans

Like ANCHISE, ENIGMA is developing a tool to scan police and ICOM databases for stolen or looted items.

Charalampos Georgiadis, ENIGMA’s coordinator, says the technologies will be more effective if all museums use the same methods to describe at-risk items.

‘We want to create a unique identifier for objects,’ said Georgiadis, an associate professor at the School of Civil Engineering of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece.

He said this means developing standardised descriptions – including colour, material, shape and size – that museums can use with minimum effort and cost.

ENIGMA, which runs through 2025, also wants to make it possible to use artificial intelligence to crawl the internet for images and information on objects that could be looted or stolen.

Art and antiquities have increasingly been bought and sold online since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

As a result, online marketplaces are playing a growing role in facilitating criminal activity, according to the World Customs Organization.

Illegal excavations

Researchers in ENIGMA and ANCHISE are also working on ways to protect archaeological sites from looters. They’re developing tools to monitor sites in conflict areas using remote sensing like drone footage or satellite

imagery.

Even if looted objects are eventually recovered, information that should be gleaned during an excavation is lost forever, according to Varga in Budapest.

‘If an archaeologist finds a grave with goods, they gather information on where the items are placed in the grave, whether it’s the grave of a man, woman or child, and where the grave is located,’ she said.

The Hungarian National Museum, the country’s oldest and largest museum, is responsible for many of the country’s archaeological excavations. It is informing the public about the damage caused by looting.

‘Often we don’t know about the site – that it exists at all – which is why it’s really important to educate people,’ said Varga.

Many European countries, including France, Spain, Greece and Italy, face a great deal of theft and looting, according to researchers in the projects.

‘We don't want to lose our cultural heritage in Europe,’ said Georgiadis of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. ‘It connects us to our roots.’

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More info

- AURORA
- ANCHISE
- ENIGMA
- Trafficking in cultural goods (DG HOME)
- EU-funded cultural heritage research and innovation