



## **REMARKS BY DIRECTOR OF UNICRI, Antonia Marie De Meo**

### **International Conference on Cultural Heritage Protection (CHP) in Crisis Areas**

**Friday, September 29, 2023, Vincenza, Italy  
(~20 minutes)**

Esteemed guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to speak to you today on the important issue of cultural heritage protection.

The Carabinieri Cultural Heritage Protection Command has been recognized by the United Nations as one of the most significant national public agencies in the field of cultural heritage protection, with the largest and most efficient database for stolen cultural property. This elevates the discussions we are having here and provides a platform for meaningful collective action to protect our shared cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage speaks a universal language. It is a testament to the collective memory and identity of peoples and nations. It educates and depicts values and beliefs. Long before television and social media existed, people communicated through art. They told the stories of their civilizations, and many people, including me, believe that artists have special insights into life as it unfolds. We witness through them the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual achievements of countless generations, and we have a window into new dimensions of our present and future through their creative interpretations.

This is why cultural property, with its historic, scientific, and artistic importance, should not be considered commodities to trade for profit on illicit markets. And yet, we know many do precisely this. The retail value of trafficking in cultural property is estimated at \$1.2 to \$1.6 billion annually. Criminal activities encompass a range of illicit actions, including the theft of cultural property from museums, illegal excavation and looting of archaeological sites, and fraudulent transfer of ownership. It is imperative that we take necessary legal measures to address ongoing threats to cultural property, particularly in conflict zones. Illicit trafficking, theft, and destruction of cultural property have become rampant, underscoring the urgency of our collective efforts to protect, investigate, prosecute, and recover these treasures.

I am speaking to you today on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). UNICRI is one of the six research and training institutes of the United Nations, and the only one focused on crime prevention and criminal justice. For almost 60 years, UNICRI has been hosted by Italy, with our headquarters in Turin and a liaison office in Rome. We are proud to carry out our mandate with strong support from Italy, since our mandate closely aligns to Italian national priorities, especially on today's topic. UNICRI identifies evolving threats and trends in crime, as well as best practices in responding to them, within our wider aim of advancing justice, security, and the rule of law in support of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. Relevant to today's topic, we support conflict-affected nations by helping them to recover and repatriate stolen cultural assets.

What I'd like to do now is tell you a story about the trafficking of particularly valuable cultural property to highlight the challenges that arise at different stages of cultural heritage protection. My story begins 25 years ago in conflict-ridden Libya, just south across the Mediterranean Sea.

Around the year 2000, during the regime of Colonel Gaddafi, ruthless criminal looters and traffickers came to the city of Shahhat in northeastern Libya. Shahhat is only 100 km west of Derna, which has been in the news lately due to catastrophic flooding resulting from storm Daniel. In ancient times, Shahhat was the city of Cyrene. Cyrene was one of the principal cities of the Greek Hellenic world, and it remained a great city until the earthquake of the year 365 AD. Its ruins and cultural significance have been famous for centuries, and it is protected as one of the five UNESCO World Heritage sites in Libya. It is also, however, a prime location for traffickers and smugglers of cultural property, because of its rich archaeological ruins and vacuum of rule of law and security in Libya.

In present-day Cyrene, our traffickers discovered, among other things, an extremely valuable piece of cultural property. It is called the *Half-Veiled Head of a Woman*. She is a funerary statue from the Greco-Libyan period, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. According to archaeologists, we know of only 10 sculptures of a veiled face, all women in the ancient world, and all from Cyrene. She portrays a beautiful goddess or funerary divinity. Her style and delicacy make her a universal masterpiece. She represents the immense significance of Libyan cultural history to the world. And yet, she fell victim to ruthless criminal looters and traffickers. They stole her and then severed her head, smuggled her out of Libya, and sold her head and likely other parts for profit. Looters and smugglers often break large statues into smaller pieces – called “orphans” – to ease transport and avoid detection by customs and border guards. It is hard to find the words for such inhumane destruction of cultural heritage.

Our first lesson is that countries with turbulent histories, marked by conflict and political instability, place cultural heritage in grave danger. It is well-documented that looting of antiquities increases during times of civil unrest and conflict, as well as from areas with insufficient security. Ancient sites, artifacts, and museums have been subjected to damage, destruction, and looting, with countless objects of art smuggled across borders to further financial profits. In fact, in 2016, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee placed all 5 of Libya's cultural heritage sites on its List of World Heritage Sites in Danger, because of the continued threat of damage. The Committee noted Libya's ongoing conflict, high level of instability, and presence of armed groups on the protected sites. The Committee called on the international community to increase protection for World Heritage Sites in Danger.

Once antiquities have been smuggled, they may end up on display in foreign museums or mansions of wealthy collectors. This is what happened to the Libyan *Half-Veiled Head*. In fact, she was part of a criminal investigation that lasted 5 years into a well-known art dealer in New York, who was found to have illegally acquired some 180 stolen antiquities with no provenance, stolen from their countries of origin, trafficked by more than 12 different criminal networks – some with ties to Italy – and valued at \$70 million. This was, however, only a small part of the overall investigation, which involved law enforcement from 11 countries and found that the art dealer had been acquiring and selling more than 1000 stolen antiquities since the late 1980s, valued at more than \$200 million at their time of purchase.

Here I would like to digress to highlight an interesting development in forensic science related to investigation and prosecution of cultural property crimes. UNICRI and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), based in Vienna, are intensifying efforts to use nuclear science to combat illicit trafficking in cultural property. Nuclear analytic techniques can assist national law enforcement in three key ways: 1) they can identify fraudulent cultural heritage being passed-off by criminals as originals; 2) they can identify trafficked cultural heritage; and 3) they can identify the exact geographic provenance of certain types of precious metals. This is important because when artifacts are removed from their original context without proper documentation and excavation, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for archaeologists and historians to reconstruct the complete story of the site and its cultural significance. This information is also critical evidence in prosecutions against traffickers of cultural property, as well as illicit trade and forgeries. UNICRI and IAEA plan to share success stories on the use of nuclear analytic techniques to detect, investigate, and prosecute looted and fake artifacts.

Back to the case of the Libyan *Half-Veiled Head of a Woman*. As mentioned, US authorities seized and confiscated the head as part of wider extensive criminal investigations that have resulted in many criminal convictions and extraditions. As part of criminal accountability, US authorities, especially the New York District Attorney's Office, are committed to returning antiquities to their rightful homes. They have, to date, seized more than 3600 antiquities and returned more than 1500 antiquities around the world, including this priceless antiquity, and others, to Libya. This is an approach UNICRI strongly supports and seeks to facilitate.

I am proud to share that UNICRI assisted Libyan authorities to repatriate the *Half-Veiled Head* and other antiquities from New York to Tripoli on 31 March 2022. This was a very complicated process that involved multiple international actors, officials, and civil society. I personally accompanied the antiquities on the plane to Libya, to ensure their safe transport and arrival in Tripoli. We landed under a traditional water salute that created a rainbow over the skies of the airport, and we disembarked, with the statues packed in crates closely behind us, to a jubilant formal receiving line. Libyan officials at the highest levels welcomed home their priceless antiquities, quintessential of their rich civilization and cultural history. It is a day I will never forget. In a country fraught with human rights violations and conflict, to be part of the protection and preservation of cultural property was quite moving. Cultural rights are human rights, and having access to their priceless antiquities is a right of every people.

UNICRI's role in repatriating the *Half-Veiled Head of a Woman* was carried out through our Asset Recovery and Illicit Financial Flows Programme. UNICRI has over 25 years of experience assisting countries in their efforts to trace, freeze, seize, and confiscate illicitly obtained assets - including high-profile cultural assets such as the Libyan antiquities. This is highly technical,

expert-driven work. Ours is not a theoretical approach. Rather, we work hand-in-hand with national authorities, such as in Libya, to trace – and hopefully recover – actual assets.

The Libyan Asset Recovery and Management Office (LARMO) pro-actively coordinated the return of the antiquities. UNICRI has worked closely with the LARMO, both to train on international standards and best practices, and to work side-by-side to identify and trace specific assets linked to illicit financial flows out of Libya – ranging from bank accounts to real estate, airplanes, and cultural artifacts. We hope to repeat such repatriations, because we know there are many more illicit assets to be recovered by Libya.

The repatriation of the Libyan *Half-Veiled Head of a Woman* represents a clear victory for Libya and for international law enforcement and the rule of law. Libya's experience highlights the importance of international cooperation in recovering stolen cultural assets. This example also reminds us that all countries need to investigate, prosecute, seize, confiscate, and return cultural assets, which are an important dividend of peace in conflict zones. Equally critical is the training of law enforcement, who play a vital role in safeguarding our shared cultural heritage. Lastly, it underscores the need to secure archaeological sites and maintain inventories that facilitate monitoring and protection.

I would also like to highlight a hidden aspect of this complex illegal web of transactions, which is the link between the smuggling and sale of cultural artifacts and other serious crimes, such as money laundering, terrorist financing, and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation. Cultural property as a source of revenue for non-state armed groups was first detected in the early 1980s. From drug trafficking organizations and insurgent groups in Latin America, to warlords in Africa and Afghanistan, cultural property has been traded for weapons and used to launder dirty money many times over. Instability and conflict across North Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and South America have spurred illegal trade and enabled regional smuggling networks. Some of these networks have grown, and their profits derive not only from cultural artifacts, but also from arms, drugs, humans, and contraband goods.

It is important to recognize that smuggling routes for cultural property often overlap with trafficking routes for arms, drugs, and humans across the globe. The online market for cultural property through social media channels, eBay, and online auctions is also active. Whilst cultural artifacts are often traded on the surface web in publicly known channels, they are also traded on the Dark Web. In fact, a lead to the *Half-Veiled Head of a Woman* was first detected on the Dark Web. Looted or stolen cultural property may be sold to customers who are not aware of their illicit origins, and many people purchase cultural property without any documentation. But this is not advisable and may not be a legal defence. Provenance of cultural property is essential. Reputable museums and collectors purchase with credible evidence of provenance since it can be difficult to legally re-sell cultural property without such evidence. In fact, it is well known that legal antiquities, especially those with historic or aesthetic significance, rarely appear on the international art market without verifiable provenance, and when they do, it is an indication that they may have been looted.

Returning to my example of Libya, in the wake of the Arab Spring, antiquities crimes intensified after ISIL gained a foothold in the country in 2014. They took advantage of existing Islamist-inspired insurgent networks, and, for a short time, they occupied nearly 250 km of seaside territory near Sirte, Benghazi, and Derna, including protected areas around ancient

Cyrene. This enabled them to plunder antiquities from archaeological sites in Cyrene and beyond. Indeed, during a raid of an ISIL compound, security forces found Roman and Byzantine artifacts stored in an ISIL commander's quarters in Benghazi. In 2016, field evidence proved ISIL's looting, storing, and trafficking of antiquities excavated and stolen from Libya across the Mediterranean Sea in partnership with the Italian Mafia, who then provided ISIL with smuggled weapons. ISIL also traded with Spanish criminal networks.

So beyond the destruction of priceless cultural heritage for profit, we must also be concerned about the security implications of organized criminal networks, armed groups, and terrorist groups involved in the looting, smuggling, and trafficking of cultural heritage to finance their wider criminal and terrorist enterprises. UNICRI is in the midst now of in-depth research into this phenomenon. We are assessing the scope and impact of cultural heritage crimes worldwide, including analyzing emerging trends, identifying challenges faced by countries seeking to protect their cultural heritage, and exploring the links between trafficking in cultural heritage and financing of terrorism.

UNICRI also cooperates with The American University of Rome to organize Specialized Courses on Cultural Heritage, Crime and Security. These courses are tailored to law enforcement, customs officials, archaeologists, and other relevant stakeholders involved in the protection and recovery of cultural heritage. The 4<sup>th</sup> edition of this joint Course will take place online from 13 to 17 November, and we invite you to register and join us if you are interested to explore further these issues of looting and trafficking of cultural property.

In closing, I would like to share with you six recommendations that, in UNICRI's view, are a starting point to build a stronger international system to prevent, combat, investigate, prosecute, and recover cultural property subjected to various illegal crimes.

1. Establish comprehensive databases of cultural assets that use cutting-edge technologies for their protection and documentation. Countries should invest in modern inventory systems, such as digital cataloguing.
2. Use satellite imagery to monitor heritage sites and prevent theft and damage.
3. Enact national import/export regulations that align to international standards.
4. Research documentation of origin and provenance of works of arts and antiquities to combat the increase in falsified and fraudulent certificates.
5. Improve coordination between source, transit, and destination countries.
6. Enhance bilateral frameworks between requesting and requested states – *i.e.*, origin and market states – that incentivize and expedite repatriation processes.

UNICRI can provide technical assistance and expertise to build these capacities, and we continue to facilitate cooperation and encourage repatriation of stolen treasures.

Extra efforts must be taken to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of countries that have suffered from conflict, organized crime, and endemic corruption. We should collaborate to strengthen legal frameworks, enhance investigative capabilities, and provide necessary resources to protect and recover our world's precious cultural treasures. In so doing, we honour our commitment to justice, preservation, human rights, and our shared heritage of humanity. Together, we can ensure that cultural heritage remains a source of knowledge, inspiration, and pride for generations to come. Thank you.