



Smithsonian  
Museum Conservation Institute

# FIGHTING THE ILLICIT TRADE IN CULTURAL HERITAGE

## HOW CONSERVATION PROFESSIONALS ARE HELPING

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Artifacts detained by DHS-ICE agents for investigation

### Looting, theft, and trafficking of cultural heritage materials

These long-recognized problems have re-emerged in the spotlight recently, with dire reports of archaeological sites and museums in Iraq and Syria being viciously vandalized and plundered by Islamic State militants. Warnings of the “spoils” surfacing in the marketplace – with proceeds serving as a major funding stream for the IS war effort – bring the issues closer to home. Passing through intermediaries, moving across international and within national borders, exchanged through sale – via commercial art galleries, auction houses, on-line dealers, flea market vendors, or individual enterprise – or through gifting (such as tax-deductible donations), looted or stolen items can all too easily end up in collections, whether private or public.

### The law enforcement response

The United States is one of the major consumer market countries for illicitly imported and distributed commodities, with archaeological artifacts, fine arts, and other cultural heritage materials ranked with weapons and narcotics as among the most lucrative. Armed with far-reaching customs authority, special agents from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement [DHS-ICE] – posted throughout the U.S. and internationally – are among the most active law enforcement personnel working at the forefront of these issues. Other partners in these efforts include agents from the Art Crime Team of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Department of State’s Cultural Heritage Center [DOS-CHC], as well as Interpol and counterparts worldwide.

### Assistance needed

Detained cultural heritage materials pose enormous challenges to law enforcement personnel with little background or training in this type of property. After basic **documentation**, the **identification**, **authenticity**, and **provenience** of items must be ascertained relatively quickly, as well as qualification for seizure. Potential repatriation to the country of origin, and civil or criminal prosecution of implicated individuals, may follow after a detailed investigation, during which time the items may require **shipping** to experts for additional research and **storage** for long periods of time.



## Here’s how conservation professionals are making a difference

### EDUCATION

Since 2009, the Smithsonian Institution – in collaboration with DHS-ICE and DOS-CHC – has hosted 10 specialized 4-day training workshops for law enforcement agents, organized by the Museum Conservation Institute. Complementing the legal and procedural course content, the behind-the-scenes museum sessions create opportunities to:

- meet specialists and participate in demonstrations using collection items from at-risk parts of the world
- better understand the skills and methods we use to help identify, assess authenticity, and uncover evidence of provenience, as well as document and care for cultural heritage items
- break down potential trust barriers, and open up avenues for further interaction



**Above:** Participation of DHS-ICE agents in 9 Smithsonian workshops

**Left:** Hands-on session with staff experts and collection items at the Smithsonian’s Freer-Sackler Galleries of Asian Art

**Below:** Practicum session on case investigation procedures using collection items from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History



### DIRECT ASSISTANCE

#### **Technical examination • Condition assessment • Sampling guidance • Analysis • Documentation**

- provide expert advice on materials and fabrication techniques, style, and condition, to help law enforcement with identifying, assessing authenticity, and determining provenience
- generate documentation for law enforcement’s use during their investigations

#### **Collections care**

- provide expert advice on handling, packing for transport, and storage conditions, as well as conservation if needed, for cultural heritage items held by law enforcement

### EXPERT REFERRALS

- expand the technical resources available to law enforcement, through referrals within our networks of conservation and allied professional colleagues



Expert assistance with identification and technical study of illicitly imported artifacts seized by DHS-ICE agents