FIGHTING THE ILLICIT TRADE IN CULTURAL HERITAGE
HOW CONSERVATION PROFESSIONALS ARE HELPING

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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, online 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

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