

UTILISING PROVENANCE RESEARCH FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION



Angkor Wat temple complex,
Cambodia
(Photo: Scott Oves / Flickr)

AS AN ISSUE THAT TRANSCENDS NATIONAL BOUNDARIES, THE PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE PREVENTION OF TRAFFICKING IN PLUNDERED CULTURAL OBJECTS IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ENTIRE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY. ALTHOUGH IT MAY NOT BE POSSIBLE TO CREATE A PERFECT SYSTEM, IT IS CERTAINLY POSSIBLE FOR ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO DO MORE TO TACKLE THESE CRITICAL ISSUES.

The Washington Principles and Terezin Declaration established an important foundation for encouraging states, cultural institutions, public and private organisations, and even individuals to undertake provenance research on items held in their collections. To advance this process further, all research needs to be completely transparent and there must be open access to information. In cases where claims for compensation or restitution are to be filed, this process should be clear, simple, and publicly accessible.

Plundered artworks and antiquities are movable objects and have become scattered across Europe and the world. The records and expertise necessary to conduct provenance research into these objects is similarly dispersed and transnational efforts are therefore necessary to identify and ultimately return cultural heritage to where it belongs. Our vastly digitalised world provides an unprecedented opportunity to make this happen.

The plunder and destruction of cultural heritage, particularly when connected with conflict and genocide, stands as a devastating dishonour on the collective conscience of Europe and the world. The European Union, dedicated to the advancement and promotion of international human rights, must now focus on addressing the consequences of plunder and the destruction of cultural heritage. To that end, provenance research is an invaluable first step.

WITHOUT URGENT AND UNITED ACTION, OUR PAST MAY NOT HAVE A FUTURE.