
Symposium: The Illicit trade in Antiquities: Destruction and Response

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Reducing incentives for illicit trade in looted antiquities: The U.S. implementation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention

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The United States is one of only two major art-importing countries to have ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property. It is the only one with legislation establishing a framework for action to reduce pillage and illicit export from source countries that are also signatories to the Convention. In this talk, I will outline the U.S Cultural Property Implementation Act and the process by which requests from countries seeking U.S. protection for cultural patrimony in jeopardy from pillage are evaluated. To date, U.S. import controls have been granted for specific aspects of the archaeological or ethnological patrimony of El Salvador, Peru, Bolivia, Mali, and Guatemala. Broader bilateral accords to protect cultural property were subsequently negotiated with these countries and Canada. The effect of these agreements has been to remove a major art-importing country from the marketplace for pillaged and illicitly exported cultural property. I will also discuss some of the effects that these bilateral accords have had within the U.S., and on the source countries involved. There is good reason to believe that the U.S. legislation implementing the 1970 UNESCO Convention is having its intended effect as a catalyst in advancing international efforts to stem the loss of humankind's cultural heritage.