The First Conference on Protection of Cultural Property in Asia
15 – 18 February 2013, Thimphu, Bhutan

The Royal Government of Bhutan graciously hosted the first Asian-based cultural security conference, under the auspices of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MoHCa), and funded by Interpol and the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs. It was the first attempt to bring together Asian professionals in the culture protection and law enforcement sectors, and begin to develop networks and alliances in this region. In funding this convening, Interpol’s goal is to launch stronger initiatives with member states in Asia—promoting engagement and information exchange, regular posting on the stolen art database, and sustainable relationships with Asian country law enforcement and customs agencies.

The Royal Government of Bhutan was a gracious and generous host. For many attendees, it was a first visit to this remarkable and beautiful Kingdom. This gathering was unlike most conferences where attendees are ‘on their own’ for most evenings and free days. Instead, the foreign guests were treated to well-organized cultural tours of sacred monasteries and museums, and feted with rich local meals, cultural dance programs, comfortable hotels, hot stone baths, and quick shopping sprees - a rich and generous welcome and introduction to Bhutan. Everyone was humbled by the kindness and all-inclusiveness of our hosts.

Opening day began at the National Convention Center started with the marchang, a traditional Bhutanese ceremony performed to promote an auspicious start to a new endeavor. That night, a deep snow fell blanketing the country – auspicious sign for our forum to protect cultural heritage. We were profusely thanked and blessed, as indeed the deities were pleased with our conference; the much needed snow heralding a good start to the new year of the Water Snake, robust harvest, and end to the forest fires.

In attendance were about 30 international participants and 60 Bhutanese. The Bhutanese representation included the Cultural Officer and local police chief from each of the 20 national districts, as well as professionals from the Ministry of Home and Culture, local museums, and monasteries. Foreign participants came from Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, The Netherlands, UK, USA, Korea, Australia, Vietnam, China and India. The strongest law enforcement sector heralded from Europe, with the Executive Director of Police Services of Interpol, Mr Jean-Michel Louboutin as the Honorable Chief Guest. European police, investigators, criminologists, and customs agents made up the strongest component of the conference.

The 20 presenters, chiefly non-Asian, laid out sound instruments, platforms, and methodologies for combatting the illicit trade and retrieving lost cultural heritage. It was a powerful tool kit that we began with. It covered national and international laws, conventions, inventories and object
ID databases, and international joint customs operations. Presenters reviewed platforms such as ARCHEO, COLOSEUM, ICOM’s Red List and INTERPOL’s stolen art database. Additional information was provided about museum security measures, investigations by police and criminologists, the role of prosecutors, the importance of preventative measures adopted from the conservation practice, and grass roots initiatives in culturally-rich areas. The content-rich agenda even covered liaison with tourist and local infrastructure, use of the media to build awareness and participation, development of emergency and disaster preparedness, and the role of market versus source countries in the fight to protect cultural property.

Sadly, there was little police representation from most Asian countries. Noticeably lacking at this first Asian-based conference were law enforcement, customs, or Ministry of Culture personnel from Thailand, India, Nepal, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Singapore or Malaysia. Several of these countries—Thailand, China, and Singapore, for example—play major roles in international trafficking and trans-shipment. Others, such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia, are victims of ongoing looting and theft of their cultural property. The Bhutanese may have benefited the most from this conference, with a strong and broad-based attendance, and several presentations focused on illicit trafficking and theft cases in Bhutan.

There was a paucity of dialogue about other Asian countries, with no mention or discussion of the ever growing Asian-based market for antiquities. Singapore and Bangkok are both active illicit hubs, and China and Vietnam’s growing population of individuals with purchasing power creating renewed demand for antiquities globally. Thus, it felt like a missed opportunity to explore these newly-emerging markets and laundering sites. At the same time, perhaps now that the first such gathering is complete, it’s possible that future gatherings will begin to address these major threats to regional cultural heritage.

Bhutan emerged as the star player in this conference and in the protection of their cultural property. A preview of this strong role was the large sign at the national airport customs picturing Bhutanese artifacts and stating “Help Us Protect our Culture and Heritage”. (along with caveats, guidelines, and penal consequences) An active member of INTERPOL, with regular communications and postings to INTERPOL’s stolen art database, a sound and growing national database (both written and photographed) of their cultural heritage, training and posting of cultural officers in all the districts, widely distributed and culturally-aware police force, and a strong base of nationalism and religious beliefs by the population at large. Bhutan is actively engaged in the protection of their religious heritage and presented several compelling talks focused on the theft and loss, recovery and preventative methods in place.

Bhutanese speakers included: The Minister of Home and Culture, H.E. Lyonpo Minjur Dorji; Mr. Dorjee Tshering, Director General of the Department of Culture; Mr. Tshewant Gyalpo, Director of Department of Culture; and Brigadier Kipchu Namgyel, Chief of Police Royal Bhutan Police. All gave clear overviews of the current state of cultural property protection,
regional statistics of loss, including case studies of the on-going vandalism of remote chortens or stupas. These religious sites are primarily targeted for the possible snatching of the valuable dzi bead, or cat’s eye agates. Since these relic beads are greatly sought after by Taiwanese and Chinese, willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for a stunning example, the thefts continue, perhaps by hire, and certainly executed by a well-greased international smuggling ring. The violation of these sacred protective sites deeply pains the Bhutanese, and steps are being taken to stem the on-going vandalism. Several law enforcement experts from Europe, as well as the deputy director of UNESCO, met with Bhutanese officials to discuss the urgency of this problem, and launch of a strategy and programs to end these thefts.

The conference was structured into 3 thematic working sessions:

1. Policy and Institutional Framework and Capacity Building
2. Technical Aspects of Protecting Cultural Heritage Property: Networking with INTERPOL and the International Community
3. Recovery of Cultural Property, post Theft or Disaster

Highlights of a few of the talks.

Session 1 presentations dovetailed, making a strong case for the use of preventative measures to protect cultural heritage.

Mr. Etienne Clement, Deputy Director of UNESCO, Bangkok gave the opening talk for Session 1 covering national and international laws, international conventions such as the Hague, 1970 UNESCO Convention of Illicit Trafficking, and the UNIDROIT. He made a compelling argument for nation states to adopt and use these conventions, teach cultural heritage personnel and police about them, and use them as a foundation tool for combatting the illicit trade in antiquities and art.

Mr. Tshewang Gyalpo, Chief of Bhutan’s Department of Culture, spoke about the country’s national database of heritage, defined Bhutanese heritage, outlined the role of the conservation department and regional cultural officers, and the trainings in place to better secure sacred sites.

Mr. Karl-Heinz Kind, INTERPOL, provided an overview of the important and active role that this agency performs, advocating member states to join and participate. The effectiveness of the stolen art database, and PSCHE, investigations and recovery are only supported by nations’ involvement. He called for greater involvement by nations to make protection of cultural heritage a priority.

Ms. Fiona Macalister, a disaster preparedness expert from the UK, Julia Brennan, textile conservator and consultant for preventative conservation, made the case for employing preventative measures at the front end to protect cultural heritage. Fiona provided a clear blueprint for risk management and disaster planning. She outlined different disaster scenarios,
such as fire, flood, earthquake, and theft, and provided standards, checklists, and constructive methods of training. Julia outlined methods adopted from conservation including secure storage, good protective housings, training of local caretakers and cultural heritage staffs, the importance of detailed and updated documentation, analysis, collaborating with and training of law enforcement, raising public awareness and ownership through media outlets, and engagement of community based groups and tourist infrastructure.

Session 2 featured talks specifically focused on law enforcement efforts to combat the illicit trade. Among the presentations were:

**Mr. Gaspare Cilluffo, Customs, Italy**, provided an introduction to the law enforcement real time platforms of ARCHEO and COLOSSEUM. He provided clear how-to-use steps for these programs, for both customs and police, in an effort to broaden the international communications and work in real time. He emphasized the goals of sharing information about seizures and new trends, background profiles, best practices, and official consulting experts.

**Ms. Silvilie Karfeld, from the German Police**, provided extremely useful and creative methods to combat the illicit trade across uncontrolled borders. From the macro of international law enforcement efforts, collaboration between nations, to micro solutions such as neighborhood watch programs, physically marking artifacts as ID, registration of artifacts with cut off dates, pressuring and working with major online sales sites and insurance industry. Like Clement and Brennan, she advocated enhancing the awareness by common people, utilizing the media, and encouraging source countries to take action and monitor the art markets themselves.

**Both Mr. Martin Finkelberg, Art Crime Police, The Netherlands, and Mr. Iain Shearer, formerly with the UK Police**, gave an inspirational and personal talks about investigations and seizures, and the importance of networking. Iain outlined some British successes in seizing illicit Afghan antiquities since 2006. Both an archeologist and police officer, his talk was a lively history of ancient sites and their importance, how they are pillaged, and arrive in the end market. Martin used several case studies to show the success of having informants, a strong prosecutor, utilizing databases, to solve heritage thefts.

Session 3 focused on recovery and methods employed.

**Professor Duncan Chappell from Australia**, outlined several recovery cases in the market country Australia of SEA artifacts and human remains blatantly for sale by BC Gallery. While some artifacts were recovered, or pressure was brought to bear to remove artifacts from sale, the Australian laws are toothless and do not support timely prosecution or seizure. As with many countries, the little slap of the hand, does nothing to stem the trade. He called for greater funding for research, investigation and cross border collaboration in the Asian Pacific region.
Major Guy Tubiana, Chief of Security for France’s Museums and Cultural Sites, provided some sound and simple tips for securing sites and training staff. He emphasized the sixth sense of police and security experts, and the constantly changing landscape of theft and trafficking.

Brigadier Kipchu Namgyel, Chief of Royal Bhutan Police, gave an excellent talk about the state of cultural heritage protection in Bhutan, the locations of highest thefts, the incentives and investigation methods employed, and some creative, if not controversial solutions to the problem of chorten vandalism.

The conference concluded with strategic working sessions on each of the three themes. Each group provided a set of recommendations for improving nation’s capacity building, and better protection of cultural heritage though the implementation of specific tasks, many adopted from the three days of presentations.

At the end of three days, attendees took away the strong message that as a global community, we must partner, deploy all the tools possible, engage and maintain strong active relationships across borders, and promote both loss and success more effectively through the media. It also underlined the greater need for the development of stronger Asian participation in law enforcement, liaison with INTERPOL and international customs, and prioritizing the protection of cultural heritage by Asian governments.

This conference was a good first step for combatting the illicit trade in Asia. And, to maintain the momentum, we need to follow up quickly, with additional sessions in Thailand, Singapore, and China, (at the very least), with a focused attempt to identify and bring key law enforcement and cultural heritage professionals to the table. In addition, we could strategically reinforce the message with post conference trainings of law enforcement, customs, and rural caretakers in methods of investigation, analysis, better security, filing stolen art, and monitoring of art sales. Too many major Asian players were missing in Bhutan, but there is a lot of opportunity ahead.

Website of conference: www.mohca.gov.bt/conference

Published papers forthcoming in 2013

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