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Saturday, March 02, 2013 - Australia, Bhutan, Chappell, Conference of Protection of Cultural Property in Asia, Germany, Italy, Julia Brennan, Martin Finkelberg No comments

Continued coverage of the Conference on Protection of Cultural Property in Asia



Textile conservator Julia M. Brennan continues coverage of last month's conference.

The conference was structured into 3 thematic working sessions: Policy and Institutional Framework and Capacity Building (Session 1); Technical Aspects of Protecting Cultural

Heritage Property: Networking with INTERPOL and the International Community (Session 2); and Recovery of Cultural Property, post Theft or Disaster (Session 3). Here are 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 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict; 1970 UNESCO Convention on 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 his agency performs, advocating member states to join and participate. The effectiveness of INTERPOL's stolen works of art database and Project PSCHE (designed to utilize the Italian Carabinieri for the Protection of Cultural Heritage's help in modernizing the database). He emphasized that investigations and recovery are only supported by nations' involvement and called for greater involvement by nations to make protection of cultural heritage a priority.

Ms. Fiona Macalister, a disaster preparedness expert from the UK, and I, a textile conservator and consultant for preventative conservation, made the case for employing preventative measures at the front end to protect cultural heritage.



Julia Brennan (left) and Fiona Macalister (right) with Dasho Dorjee Tshering, Secretary of Home and Culture

Fiona provided a clear blueprint for risk management and disaster planning, outlining different disaster scenarios in the event of fire, flood, earthquake, and theft and provided standards, checklists, and constructive methods of training. I 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 presenters 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. Silvie 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 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, Professor Chappell said, and 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 through 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

Julia M. Brennan is a Conservator and Cultural Heritage Protection Consultant www.caringfortextiles.com.

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