



Own Initiative Report on Cross-Border Restitution Claims of Works of Art and Cultural Goods Looted in Armed Conflict and Wars

Comments from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

KEY POINTS

- 1) *The European Parliament's own initiative report on cross-border restitution claims of looted cultural goods is welcome, in the context of worldwide efforts to protect heritage from the effects of conflict and crime*
- 2) *The report should recommend further investment in programmes such as the 15th Century Book Project, in order to build up a stronger understanding of how ancient and rare books can be identified, along with their individual histories*
- 3) *The report should underline the need for further work on defining means of identifying individual copies of rare books and manuscripts, in order to ensure that these works can also benefit from restitution initiatives*

As UNESCO Members underlined in their Recommendation of 2015¹, documentary heritage is what allows the knowledge of the past not only to survive today, but also to feed into further creativity and innovation. Books, manuscripts, letters and other documents carry the ideas that shape our politics, societies and philosophies.

As such, documentary heritage is a core part of overall cultural heritage. While there is often more attention paid to the destruction and looting of archaeological sites, it is equally true that when libraries and archives are destroyed, looted or dispersed², a country risks losing touch with its past. Antique books are highly prized, with a strong market for such editions³.

This is an issue both within European history, with libraries looted during the Second World War⁴, and nowadays, for example around the destruction of the University of Mosul Library⁵, which brought together priceless collections from across the region.

IFLA itself is already in discussion with other relevant organisations to establish best practices and guidelines for antiquarian booksellers and others to help them identify and deal with books and other documents which have been stolen or looted. It is also closely involved in initiatives such as the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme⁶, and the Blue Shield.

In this context, the initiative of the European Parliament is very welcome.

¹ UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form (http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49358&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

² See in particular the case of the Library at the University of Mosul: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mosuls-library-without-books>

³ According to an estimate of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers, it was already worth around half a billion dollars in 2000: <https://www.ilab.org/articles/rare-book-market-today>

⁴ For example, Deutsche Welle, *Nazi-looted books found in German libraries*, 6 August 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/nazi-looted-books-found-in-german-libraries/a-39984043>

⁵ The Independent, *How Mosul's last librarian is preparing for when his city is free from Isis*, 20 March 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mosul-central-library-isis-iraq-battle-war-destroyed-books-eye-a7631956.html>

⁶ UNESCO Memory of the World Programme: <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow>

Investing in Provenance Research and Capacity Building

We strongly support the emphasis on the value of provenance research, as already underlined in the opinion by the CULT Committee. This remains decisive for any meaningful effort to validate and deliver on cross-border restitution claims. Such work will benefit from further support for developing capacity and standards.

Highly valuable work is already taking place through the 15th Century Book Trade project⁷, funded by the EU in its first phase. This looks into the books published in the first fifty years of modern printing (1450-1500), in order to answer questions about the distribution and use of such works, their contemporary market value, their content, and circulation and re-use of illustrations, as well as producing visualisations which will enable a wider range of people to understand tendencies in the field.

This work is likely to lead to valuable lessons about the books in question, as well as about how to identify their provenance and subsequent travels. These could provide useful insights into how subsequent books have moved around the continent and beyond, supporting broader provenance research.

The European Parliament Own Initiative Report could usefully recommend that this work – and similar projects – be continued in future financial periods in order to ensure that it can realise its full potential.

Developing a Register and the Associated Descriptive Data

We support the idea of a register, including with information on owners. The experience of the 15th Century Book Project is instructive. Nonetheless, in order for this work to cover all cultural heritage, it will need to deal with the specificities of documentary heritage – manuscripts, books and other documents.

While object IDs for museum pieces may already be in place, the same cannot necessarily be said for many of the works held by libraries, outside of any internal registration numbers used. In the case of manuscripts, there is not yet a standard metadata system in place. Meanwhile for printed books, while an edition may well exist in a national bibliography, it may not be the case that a specific copy is easily identifiable.

IFLA itself launched work last year, focusing on the specific case of manuscripts written on palm leaves (a traditional medium in South Asia) with a view to developing metadata standards – the necessary information to allow manuscripts to be identified and registered. It became clear from this work⁸ that there is a considerable gap in available standards for all types of manuscript – including those on more traditionally European media – which will need to be filled in order to make work on a register meaningful.

The European Parliament Own Initiative report could usefully recommend further focus and investment on the development of such standards in order to ensure that all cultural heritage can be covered by – and so benefit from – the proposed register.

IFLA is the global voice of the library and information profession, with members in 145 countries. It works both to empower the sector to provide the best possible service to users, and to advocate for freedom of expression and the best possible library services worldwide. Contact:

Stephen.wyber@ifla.org

⁷ <http://15cbooktrade.ox.ac.uk/>

⁸ Report from the workshop on Palm Leaf Manuscripts <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/18573>