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ICME presentation 'Object ID as a tool to fight illicit traffic of cultural heritage'

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When a brutal robbery of art works takes place in a western museum, the whole world will know the next day. It is headlines in all newspapers, like when a few months ago armed robbers stormed a museum in Sweden and left off with a speedboat, carrying a Rembrandt and two other paintings. A comparable incident happened in Belgium not so long ago. The pattern is very often the same: the thieves know exactly what they are after and they head immediately for the one or two works of art they need. Apparently somebody ordered that particular work of art.

In 1997, as rebel forces were reaching Kinshasa, the capital of (then) Zaire, one of the first things that happened was the systematic plundering of the National Museum. Not at random, like one may expect from soldiers, but very methodically, much the same way as in Sweden and Belgium, apparently on the basis of somebody's shopping list. This theft hardly made the international newspapers.

Maybe they were stolen for a private collector. But it could also be that the items appear in the international art market after some time. Can Congo (as the country is called now) claim these items back, when they are on display in the window of a prestigious art gallery or on auction at one of the famous auction houses? The chances are usually small, because such items have often been carefully laundered, in much the same way that you launder money. But the chances are nil, if you can't even prove that they once were yours. That is why documentation is crucial to the protection of cultural objects, as is standardisation of descriptions.

It is one thing to describe objects as a security measure. It is quite another thing to circulate this documentation once an object is stolen. Ideally, the information that can identify a stolen object should be able to travel faster than the object itself. This means that the information reaches customs authorities, Interpol and other organisations before the object crosses borders.

Object ID can do that. The Object ID standard was developed by Robin Thornes for the Getty Information Institute and was adopted by UNESCO, Interpol, Scotland Yard, insurance companies and museums all over the world. It is a standardised description of objects in only ten fields - with a photograph - to be filled out in such a way that any police or customs official should be able to read it.

The Royal Tropical Institute and the Leiden Ethnology Museum in the Netherlands developed - together with Jeanne Hoogenboom - a software application, which was implemented in 1998 in the National Museum in Mali and the Cham Museum in Danang, Vietnam.

In 2000 the Royal Tropical Institute received funds from Dutch development assistance to introduce the system in 12 other countries. This means: installing the hardware and the software, training the staff and offering helpdesk services. It is not a hit-and-run project. The museums are followed for a number of years. Additional training and advice is offered, exchange of experiences between the museums is fostered.

This fall we will pay follow-up visits to all the 14 countries that are now working with the system and we will install a new version of the software, developed by the Royal Tropical Institute with Furore, a specialised software company.

I will now show you the (new) software, because that will also introduce you to the Object ID standard. And I will show you the website (http://www.kit.nl/objectid) we maintain that serves as an information desk, a helpdesk for frequently asked questions and an exchange platform.

One added comment: the development of the software was entirely paid for by Dutch development assistance. Nor we, nor Furore has any financial interest in spreading the software. We are a not-for-profit institution, Furore has been paid for its services.

You don't even need the software to use Object ID, you can also fill out the ten Object ID fields on a piece of paper. But using modern information and communication technology serves this one extra goal: to let the information travel faster than the stolen object itself.

ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography
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