

A Plea for the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to those who created it

An appeal by UNESCO's Director-General

One of the most noble incarnations of a people's genius is its cultural heritage, built up over the centuries by the work of its architects, sculptors, painters, engravers, goldsmiths and all the creators of forms, who have contrived to give tangible expression to the many-sided beauty and uniqueness of that genius.

The vicissitudes of history have nevertheless robbed many peoples of a priceless portion of this inheritance in which their enduring identity finds its embodiment.

Architectural features, statues and friezes, monoliths, mosaics, pottery, enamels, masks and objects of jade, ivory and chased gold — in fact everything which has been taken away, from monuments to handicrafts — were more than decorations or ornamentation. They bore witness to a history, the history of a culture and of a nation whose spirit they perpetuated and renewed.

The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better.

Today, unbridled speculation fanned by the prices prevailing in the art market, incites traffickers and plunderers to exploit local ignorance and take advantage of any connivance they find. In Africa, Latin America, Asia, Oceania and even in Europe, modern pirates with substantial resources, using modern techniques to satisfy their greed, spoil and rob archaeological sites almost before the scholars have excavated them.

The men and women of these countries have the right to recover these cultural assets which are part of their being.

These men and women who have been deprived of their cultural heritage therefore ask for the return of at least the art treasures which best represent their culture, which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish.

This is a legitimate claim; and UNESCO, whose constitution makes it responsible for the preservation and protection of the universal heritage of works of art and monuments of historic or scientific interest, is actively encouraging all that needs to be done to meet it.

The return of cultural assets to their countries of origin nevertheless continues to pose particular problems which cannot be solved simply by negotiated agreements and spontaneous acts. It therefore seemed necessary to approach these problems for

their own sake, examining both the principle underlying them and all their various aspects.

This is why, on behalf of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization which has empowered me to launch this appeal:

I solemnly call upon the governments of the Organization's Member States to conclude bilateral agreements for the return of cultural property to the countries from which it has been taken; to promote long-term loans, deposits, sales and donations between institutions concerned in order to encourage a fairer international exchange of cultural property, and, if they have not already done so, to ratify and rigorously enforce the Convention giving them effective means to prevent illicit trading in artistic and archaeological objects.

I call on all those working for the information media — journalists of press and radio, producers and authors of television programmes and films — to arouse worldwide a mighty and intense movement of public opinion so that respect for works of art leads, wherever necessary, to their return to their homeland.

I call on cultural organizations and specialized associations in all continents to help formulate and promote a stricter code of ethics with regard to the acquisition and conservation of cultural property, and to contribute to the gradual revision of codes of professional practice in this connection, on the lines of the initiative taken by the International Council of Museums.

I call on universities, libraries, public and private art galleries and museums that possess the most important collections, to share generously the objects in their keeping with the countries which created and which sometimes no longer possess a single example.

I also call on institutions possessing several similar objects or records to part with at least one and return it to its country of origin, so that the young will not grow up without ever having the chance to see, at close quarters, a work of art or a well-made item of handicraft fashioned by their ancestors.

I call on the authors of art books and on art critics to proclaim how much a work of art gains in beauty and truth for the uninitiated and for the scholar, when viewed in the natural and social setting in which it took shape.

I call on those responsible for preserving and restoring works of art to facilitate, by their advice and actions, the return of such works to the countries where they were created and to seek with imagination and perseverance for new ways of preserving and displaying them once they have been returned to their homeland.

I call on historians and educators to help others to understand the affliction a nation can suffer at the spoliation of the works it has created. The power of the fait accompli is a survival of barbaric times and a source of resentment and discord which prejudices the establishment of lasting peace and harmony between nations.

Finally, I appeal with special intensity and hope to artists themselves and to writers, poets and singers, asking them to testify that nations also need to be alive on an imaginative level.

Amadou - Mahtar M'Bow