

**Fabrizio ROSSI**, Specialized Officer  
INTERPOL General Secretariat, Lyon, France



## **INTERPOL'S ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ILLICIT TRAFFICKING IN CULTURAL PROPERTY**

First of all, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Fabrizio Rossi. I am an Italian Carabinieri judicial police officer seconded to the Works of Art Unit at Interpol General Secretariat. The fight against the theft of and the illicit trafficking in cultural property has always been one of our particular concerns.

On Interpol's behalf, I would like to thank the Cultural Heritage Protection Office of the Republic of Macedonia together with UNESCO Venice Office for the invitation to attend this Regional workshop.

To give you a better idea of what our Organisation *is* and *does*, in a few words I will present the structure of our Organisation and I will develop the role of the Interpol General Secretariat in the fight against the illicit traffic in Cultural Property.

Interpol is an intergovernmental organisation with 184 member countries. It is the second largest organisation after the U.N. in terms of membership.

The governing bodies of Interpol are the *General Assembly* and the *Executive Committee*. These are deliberative organs, with decision making and supervisory powers.

Approximately 150 police officers from 76 countries representing all the regions of the world are working at the Interpol General Secretariat, which is located in Lyons, France. The composition of the staff ensures a sound knowledge and wide experience of both regional situations and the problems of international crime.

The purpose of our Organisation is:

- To ensure and promote the *widest possible mutual assistance* between all criminal police authorities, within the limits of the laws existing in the different countries and in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- To establish and develop all institutions likely to contribute effectively to the *prevention and suppression* of ordinary law crimes.

It is strictly forbidden for the Organization to undertake any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious or racial character.

Contrary to common belief, Interpol is not made up of international brigades of investigators.

Interpol Police Officers cannot carry out investigations in the member countries. Instead, international investigations are carried out by the national police forces of the member countries governed by the national legislation in force in the countries concerned.

Therefore, the General Secretariat has no power to force a country to take action, or not to take action, in a specific police investigation.

In each Interpol member country, the task of co-operation is assigned to the National Central Bureau, usually located in the country's capital city, which centralises all information of international interest. The Republic of Macedonia's NCB is in Skopje.

Since 1947, Interpol has invested a lot of efforts in the fight against cultural property crime.

It is extremely difficult to get a clear picture of the extent of art theft in the world, and it is not very likely that detailed statistics will ever be made available. National statistics are usually based on the circumstances surrounding the theft (simple theft, breaking-in and stealing, armed robbery, etc.) and rarely provide information on the actual nature of the stolen object itself.

Every year, the General Secretariat of Interpol sends a message to its member countries requesting *statistics on art thefts* committed throughout the previous year, and requesting information on the *nature of the objects stolen* and the *places they were stolen from*. On an average, only 30% of the countries reply, and only a part of the replies contain substantial information.

Based on the statistics provided for 2004, the highest number of art theft cases is registered in France (5453 cases; 2003: 6712 cases), Poland (2577; 2003: 1140), Germany (1840; 2003: 1997), Russia (1855; 2003: 1758) and Italy (1.190; 2003: 1293).

Usually, the exact number of stolen objects cannot be provided, but for a country like Italy, it is estimated in the range of 20, 000 items. On this basis, the commercial value of stolen works of art cannot be established, but it can be taken as granted that the losses are serious not only under the aspect of cultural heritage preservation, but also in terms of monetary value.

Which tools are at our disposal to efficiently fight against the illicit traffic in cultural property?

*A wide and fast circulation of information among Interpol's member countries is indispensable for efficient police co-operation.*

Telecommunications network

Our worldwide telecommunication network enables to circulate information among all the member countries within a few minutes. The ever-increasing number of messages, in particular of those containing images (photographs, fingerprints) presented a new challenge to Interpol. Interpol's response is a new telecommunications system based on the Internet technology, and which presents advantages in terms of speed and costs while maintaining the required high security standards. It will not only facilitate the connection of more end users, but

make it possible to connect entire communication networks at a local or national level.

The system is called I-24/7 and the roll-out has already started with currently 179 countries and 24 additional end points (Sub-regional bureaus and Sub-bureaus) already connected and the number of connections is constantly increasing. World wide connectivity is scheduled to be finalized at the end of this year. All European countries are connected.

To give you an idea, over 9 million messages have transited the system in 2005, i.e. over 25,000 messages on a daily basis. This is three times the amount of the traffic in 2003.

I-24/7 does not only enable a quick exchange of information among the NCBs and the General Secretariat, it also enables to connect more national law enforcement officers from other agencies and even to connect not only single users, but entire local or national networks. It also gives access to a number of central databases.

#### *International notices*

At the request of the member countries, international art notices were published from 1947 to March 2000. With the new technologies, the diffusion of information through «paper» is outdated. For example, who will try to find among thousands of art notices if one item is stolen or not? Nobody.

Furthermore, the majority of member countries did not have all the art notices published since 1947, and only few of them had included the contents of these notices in their own records.

#### Poster of the most wanted Works of Art

Every six months we publish a *poster* showing the *six most wanted works of art*. It is the only paper publication remaining for the stolen works of art. On average, 2 out of six objects represented are recovered.

As an exception, the June 2003 edition was entirely dedicated to Iraq, some copies of the June and December 2005 versions are available for you.

#### The «ASF - works of art» computerised database:

In 1995, the General Secretariat developed a computerised database for stolen works of art, including descriptions and photographs.

This database has been made for Police Officers and is based on a visual description of works of art which is very easy to carry out. Description forms enable the 184 member countries to use the same criteria to describe an item.

Contrary to common belief, we do not keep information on all offences committed anywhere in the world. We only record the crimes considered to have international ramifications and we only open files for international criminals.

Today, the stolen art database contains approx. 28,700 items (status on 31/01/2006) and the vast majority (75% of the information) has been provided by European countries.

#### Direct access to the database

Since January 1999, this database is available to all member countries by means of a computer program called «EASYFORM».

This program enables countries to consult the description of works of art, as well as the corresponding photographs. This represents considerable progress because the information on works of art is available to the entire world 24 hours after registration at the General Secretariat.

The use of direct remote checks has much decreased over the last few years. The reluctance to use this facility may be motivated by the availability of another more user-friendly tool developed by Interpol, the CD-ROM.

Since 17 November 2005, the works of art database is directly accessible to member countries through the I-24/7 telecommunications system. Following a test phase, where Slovakia and Slovenia in addition to Austria, Germany and the USA had assisted the General Secretariat, the application was finalized. It ensures a fast and secure access and offers a wide range of user-friendly facilities you already know from the CD-ROM – and some more.

You will have one search screen, most of fields are accompanied with listed values in order to avoid spelling mistakes or the use of non-existing terms, and the replies are displayed immediately with photographs and case information.

#### The CD-Rom «Interpol – Stolen Works of Art»

With a view to enable other law enforcement agencies than the NCBs, the customs, the cultural institutions and the private sector to have access to information on stolen art, in co-operation with a private French company, the General Secretariat started in 1999 to produce and distribute a CD-ROM on stolen works of art.

On this CD-ROM, you have the possibility to select your working language: English, French or Spanish. The CD-ROM contains not only information on stolen art, or art items found in suspicious circumstances, but also:

- the text of international Conventions of the UNESCO in 1970 and UNIDROIT in 1995,
- the list of the member countries and their telephone numbers,
- the OBJECT-ID developed by the Getty Information Institute (minimum description standard of a work of art) which was recognised by both UNESCO and ICOM,
- a list of objects at risk (red list of ICOM).

This CD-ROM is one of the registers mentioned in the UNIDROIT Convention of 1995 in its article 4 § 4.

The CD-ROM is updated every two months; information received at the General Secretariat between two updates is regularly published on our web site under the section "Works of Art" and "Recent thefts". Both tools together form a coherent package including all information on stolen works of art available at the General Secretariat. In the near future, due to the limited storage capacity of the CD-ROM, we will possibly switch to the DVD technology.

#### Internet:

In July 2000, the General Secretariat has opened an INTERNET site for the works of art ([www.interpol.int](http://www.interpol.int), under the pages "Other crime areas", "Property crime", "Works of Art", etc.).

This site, publicly accessible, contains information on:

- Interpol meetings and conferences, recommendations adopted;
- Specific alerts in the event of important thefts (e. g. the armed robbery from a museum in Novi Sad, Serbia & Montenegro in January 2006, the theft of a bronze sculpture by Henry Moore in December;
- 2005 in the UK, Munch's "The Scream" from a museum in Oslo in August 2004, the "Saliera" from a museum in Vienna, May 2003 and its recovery in 2006);
- The most recent thefts of works of art. To ensure the continuity of information, stolen works of art reported to the General Secretariat between two updates of the CD-ROM will be published in this web site section;
- Items found by Police Officers who are trying to trace the owners, the CD-ROM (technical details and conditions of subscription);
- frequently asked questions (e. g. statistics);

We have also created specific web site sections for the cultural property stolen in Iraq (with c. 2,200 items) for cultural property stolen in Afghanistan (c. 650 items).

- Organisation of international conferences:

Every 3 years, the General Secretariat organises an international symposium on the illicit traffic and theft of works of art, antiques and cultural objects. This conference is held in Lyons. The last one took place from 21 to 23 June 2005, and the minutes are published on our web site.

Since 1995, the General Secretariat organises conferences in regions that are particularly affected by this type of criminality, in particular Europe and South America.

As a response to the massive increase in the early 1990ies of crime in general and of cultural property crime in particular, Interpol has started to organize every three years a conference on the illicit trafficking in cultural property stolen in Central and Eastern Europe. After those held in Prague in 1995, in Budapest in 1998, and in Brijuni, Croatia in 2001, last one was held in Sinaia, Romania in September 2004.

- Co-operation with other international organisations:

INTERPOL signed Memoranda of Understanding with the World Customs Organization in 1998, with UNESCO in 1999 and with the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in April 2000. The existing co-operation agreement with UNESCO was amended in July 2003 by a special arrangement describing the responsibilities of both partners concerning the information supply destined to feed Interpol's data base.

Since a couple of years, the General Secretariat has actively participated in regional workshops organised by UNESCO and ICOM (International Council of Museums), where Police Officers, customs and museum curators have been invited.

In 2003, Interpol attended two workshops in Sri Lanka and in Mongolia; in 2004, two such meetings took place in Ecuador and in Argentina with Interpol participation. We attended a UNESCO regional workshop in India in September and another in Cuba in December 2005.

In addition, we continuously provided training in several Latin American countries, so last year in Brazil and we plan it in Mexico in 2006. Furthermore, we regularly lend our support to efforts for capacity building initiated by other partners, such as Europol, the European Commission or member countries.

Co-operation problems:

The key issue for Interpol has ever been and will remain the international police co-operation. My previous statements demonstrate, however, that the tools already available to ensure this co-operation are greatly under utilized.

This seems not only to be the result of a lack of willingness or of practical means to co-operate, but also a deficit in an inter-agency co-operation on a national level. That's why it is of utmost importance to establish regular working relationships between police, customs and the cultural authorities and to inform each other on important events.

Criminals:

Sometimes, offences against cultural property are committed by specialists. If they are identified by the investigators, Interpol can circulate their descriptions. Notices can be published.

These include a photograph of the offender, his identity, his fingerprints, any aliases used, and all available information of use to the police.

Details of out-of-the-ordinary modus operandi can be circulated and may help to link several different cases of theft.

We do, of course, not only need information following a theft, but also relevant information after the recovery. This is not only indispensable in order to keep the records up-to-date and reliable, but details of the circumstances surrounding the seizures, the routes, the means of transport, the methods of concealment used, the suspects involved and their links to other criminal networks are the basis for any meaningful crime intelligence analysis. Unfortunately, in a few cases only, those details are communicated.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, I would like to reassert the intention of our Organisation to co-operate closely in the fight against the illicit trafficking in stolen Cultural Property.

In order to make this fight effective, it is necessary to:

- Adopt appropriate laws for the protection of the cultural heritage;
- be party to the international conventions;
- establish and update the inventories of the collections;
- transmit any information concerning stolen works of art as rapidly as possible to the competent Police Services. Further transmission via the NCBs to the General Secretariat entails a rapid and wide distribution of this information as an effective tool in the fight against this form of criminality;
- ensure the museum personnel participate in the police and customs training sessions;

- establish a good co-operation between the concerned ministries;
- adopt a specialist database on a national level; an orientation towards the Interpol database would ensure compatibility and facilitate further message exchange procedures;

Thank you for your attention.