



INNOVATIONS FOR COMBATTING TRAFFICKING IN CULTURAL GOODS

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Cultural goods embody immense societal value spanning culture, art, history and science. At the same time, they often have a considerable economic or market value or are desirable to own. This puts them at risk of trafficking including by criminals with links to organised crime and, in some case, even terrorist groups. This type of trafficking has a devastating impact on cultural heritage, especially in areas of conflict and crises.

Trafficking in cultural goods involves the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of valuable items, including:

- **Theft**, for example from cultural heritage institutions or private collections
- **Illicit excavations or looting of archaeological sites**
- **Forgery** of cultural goods

These activities are also combined with related crimes like smuggling, fencing (i.e. buying and selling stolen items), document forgery and corruption. Beyond trafficking, criminals can abuse even legally acquired cultural goods for money laundering, sanctions evasion, tax evasion or terrorism financing.

Crimes related to cultural goods have specific features, distinguishing them from other illegal activities. The **identity, authenticity, provenance** and **legal status** of a cultural good is rarely instantly visible, and often requires specific expertise to be established.

Public and private collections, **monuments and archaeological sites** are vulnerable to theft and looting, especially in conflict and crisis situations.

Moreover, **unregistered cultural goods**, especially from archaeological sites or uncatalogued collections, are hard to detect and track once they

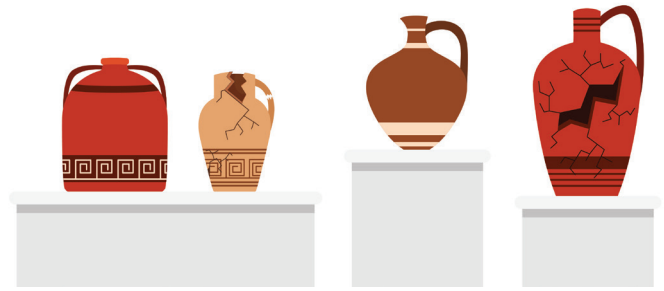
have become subject to trafficking. In addition, the market for cultural goods is subject to certain vulnerabilities attractive to criminals.

Recently, criminals have also been profiting from the **increased availability of online sales channels** to expand their customer base on the licit and illicit markets.

This poses additional challenges to law enforcement due to the volume of cultural goods to be checked, data encryption and the number of jurisdictions potentially involved. Furthermore, criminals deliberately **operate across borders** to maximise their profits, blur their trails, hide from apprehension, and **falsify provenance or provenience** of trafficked cultural goods.

Investigations into cultural goods trafficking cases are therefore **complex**. They require specific expertise on cultural goods, and a **high number of authorities** to be involved (such as the police, customs, border guards, ministries of culture, financial intelligence units, and the judiciary), often involving various jurisdictions due to the cross-border scope of many cases. To combat cultural goods trafficking, a robust legislative framework, international cooperation at various levels (bilateral, regional, or even multilateral with international organisations), and evidence-based recommendations are crucial.

At the EU level, combatting cultural goods trafficking is supported by the [EU Security Union Strategy 2020-2025](#), the [EU Strategy to Tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025](#) and the [EU action plan against trafficking in cultural goods](#). As the EU's agency for law enforcement cooperation, Europol supports the EU Member States in addressing cultural goods trafficking and the fight against organised crime¹.



The **EU action plan against trafficking in cultural goods**, adopted on 13 December 2022, aims to deter organised criminal networks effectively, to address evolving security threats and to protect cultural heritage within and beyond the EU. It builds on existing EU activity and addresses ongoing challenges by improving prevention and detection of crimes by market participants and cultural heritage institutions; strengthening law enforcement and judicial capabilities; boosting international cooperation, including with source and transit countries of cultural goods in conflicts and crises, as well as cooperation with further stakeholders such as civil society.

Developing innovative solutions in the fight against trafficking in cultural goods

Various European funding opportunities, such as [Horizon Europe](#), [Erasmus+](#), and the [Internal Security Fund](#), provide support for initiatives addressing trafficking in cultural goods. This factsheet showcases some of the innovative solutions being developed with the support of EU funding, and is connected with the [Community for European Research and Innovation for Security \(CERIS\)](#) workshop on [innovation against the trafficking in cultural goods](#)².

Supporting the detection, identification and characterisation of cultural goods

Some specific activities of EU-funded projects such as [ANCHISE](#), [AURORA](#), [ENIGMA](#), [RITHMS](#), [ARTDETECT](#) work on **innovative tools to identify cultural goods and support the detection of trafficking**.

Their research includes **chemical markings**, **artificial intelligence** and **machine learning algorithms** which could allow the analysis of images to detect stolen or looted artifacts. In addition, digital databases play an important role and new technologies like **blockchain**, as well as the **use of satellite imaging and drones**, might help to track ownership and movement of objects trade online and offline.

These technologies could better support law enforcement agencies, museums, and cultural institutions to identify and recover stolen cultural goods, bringing perpetrators to justice.

Contributing to the conceptualisation of web crawlers and market intelligence

An increasing part of cultural goods trafficking transactions take place online. Web crawlers and market intelligence platforms allow the use of data analytics and machine learning to **monitor online marketplaces** and **identify suspicious activity**, providing law enforcement with relevant data and information.

For example, EU-funded projects like [RITHMS](#), [CONNECTOR](#), and [ENIGMA](#) are working to support law enforcement, local, regional and international authorities with these types of new tools.

These innovations should enable to better disrupt illegal online marketplaces, flag suspicious listings, or inform investigations and prosecutions much faster, and with more data.

¹ More information and latest updates on : [Trafficking in cultural goods - European Commission](#).

² The Community for European Research and Innovation for Security (CERIS) organises thematic workshops where relevant innovation and security research projects are invited to showcase their solutions and tools. This type of event also serves as a platform that brings together security practitioners, innovators, operators, and policy makers to present their experiences and opportunities for collaborative research and innovation in Europe, and to discuss how research results can be more efficiently exploited.

Enhancing cooperation

Fostering international cooperation and **strengthening expert networks** is vital in combating illicit trafficking in cultural goods.

[The European Commission's dialogue with the art market](#) serves as a platform for exchanging information on policies, actions, and legislation, aiming to protect cultural heritage while supporting a reputable and thriving art market.

Additionally, EU-funded project [RITHMS](#) dedicates considerable efforts to this task, mapping and examining the binding legal instruments regarding international cooperation, taking into account the connection between offences against cultural heritage, organised crime and money laundering. Also other EU-funded projects like [ANCHISE](#) build on previous R&I projects, such as [NETCHER](#), to combine networking between practitioners and researchers with the development of new technologies to foster stronger innovations.

Aligned with the [EU Western Balkans Strategy](#), [an EU funded initiative in the Western Balkans](#) is being coordinated by UNESCO to strengthen capacity building and enhance a better regional coordination to address this matter.

Gaining more knowledge and raising awareness

Raising awareness about illicit trafficking in cultural goods with various stakeholders, including citizens and civil society, is crucial to protect the world's cultural heritage. By understanding the issue, people can recognize and report suspicious activities, make informed choices, and ultimately help disrupt trafficking networks.

For example, the EU-funded project [PITCHER](#) proposes a new model for showing **young people** how they can support the fight against looting and illicit trafficking of cultural goods.

Additionally, the ERC project [Trafficking Transformations](#) aims to gain deeper insights into transnational criminal networks by **tracking the transformations of illicit goods**, such as antiquities, rare wildlife, and fossils, and exploring how these objects drive crime and influence participants, thereby revealing a new understanding of organised crime through a focus on objects.

The EU-funded [ARTDETECT](#) project integrates art history, technical analysis, and data science to develop innovative tools for detecting **art forgeries**. By advancing **connoisseurship methodology**³, the project aims to enable experts to predict high-risk forgeries and revolutionize the field of art history.

³ Connoisseurship methodology is a research approach used in various fields, including art history, cultural heritage, and antiquities, to study and authenticate objects, artworks, and cultural artefacts. Connoisseurship involves a deep understanding of the object's material, technical, and historical context, as well as its aesthetic and stylistic characteristics.

