

## Assistance for Heritage in Danger

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Resumen

### **Asistencia al patrimonio cultural en peligro**

*La inestimable diversidad cultural y patrimonial de los países árabes se ve afectada por los múltiples conflictos recurrentes que se producen en ellos. Debido a esto - y con vistas a aportar soluciones - es menester tomar ante todo en cuenta dos aspectos: en primer lugar, se debe tener bien presente el trabajo de prevención, cuyo instrumento principal es la realización de una labor de documentación, en especial la realización de inventarios; en segundo lugar, se debe estrechar la colaboración regional para sensibilizar a la población a la importancia que reviste el objetivo de proteger su patrimonio histórico y cultural, sin que la persecución de esa finalidad vaya en detrimento alguno de la sociedad y sin que se privilegie una cultura con respecto a otra.*

*La solidaridad debe ser efectiva tanto en el plano logístico como en el de suministro de asistencia técnica. De ahí la importancia que tiene la colaboración entre las distintas organizaciones regionales del ICOM.*

Résumé

### **L'assistance au patrimoine en danger**

*Les pays arabes ont une diversité culturelle et patrimoniale d'une valeur inestimable mais de nombreux conflits y sévissent de manière récurrente. Ainsi, deux aspects doivent être pris en compte afin d'apporter des solutions. Le premier concerne la prévention avec comme document principal l'inventaire et le second la collaboration régionale afin de sensibiliser la population à l'importance de leur histoire sans aucun préjudice ni pour la société ni pour une culture en faveur d'une autre.*

*La solidarité doit être opérationnelle tant au niveau logistique qu'en tant que support d'expertise, ce qui justifie l'importance de la collaboration entre les différentes organisations régionales de l'ICOM.*

### **Introduction**

Working for the safekeeping and promotion of heritage is, in normal times, a matter of individual commitment and personal challenge. The task, as noble as it is, involves militant involvement where perseverance and powers of persuasion are the qualities required and which must be mastered in order to succeed by overcoming inhibitions and gaining acceptance for choices which are not yet embraced by all and may even be contrary to standard beliefs for some.

It is therefore extremely difficult to act in an unusual situation, where surprise, the violence of the incident and the implacable march of time become determining factors for the survival of heritage property. In such emergency situations, the forces present are disproportionate: there may be a minority unable to face a brutal force acting in a determined way, and reason, moderation and the ability to listen to others may be quite impossible at the time.

There is a moment where one move can be crucial, the move to destroy or to save a unique and indeed irreplaceable record of the past. In the face of such emergency situations caused by natural phenomena or human intervention, no manual of procedures nor convenient guidelines recognized by all intervening parties will prevail. Instinct, personal initiative and determination are the only factors we can always hope to be effective.

I belong to two regional organisations, ICOM-Arab and AFRICOM, with diverse cultural and heritage properties of inestimable value, but where, unfortunately, conflicts are chronic. The problem is omnipresent and crucial for persons in charge of heritage.

I will deal with two aspects that can be part of a common effort for intervention and recovery: one is preventive, i.e. exhaustive documentation or inventory covering all heritage property for which we are responsible, and the second aspect is the responsibility of ICOM regional organisations and there, in extreme cases, collaboration can provide substantial help with efficient contributions and solutions (even if they are only temporary) and in particular with efficient solidarity.

#### **Inventory: Documentation to Organise and Disseminate**

It is an essential to have an exhaustive inventory of heritage property and this is a priority in normal times. It is the recording and registration of cultural property for the purpose of identification and can be used for salvaging. It is an established reference for any study and research, while also being a safeguard to protect against property being removed. It is the unchanging memory of all heritage property.

Three responsibilities are involved in the establishment of an inventory. First there is the responsibility to the heritage itself, identifying it scientifically and preserving it. Second there is the responsibility to the public, endowing the heritage with value and providing reliable information. And third there is the responsibility to the law, ensuring efficient management and proper safeguarding of world heritage. The inventory confers legal and official status and existence on the collections; this facilitates their protection and helps manage them. The inventory is of fundamental importance in emergency and disaster situations where the slightest record can be of inestimable value for the restoration or restitution of a damaged item. It is also what remains when barbaric acts of destruction have annihilated everything.

The facilities and tools used for keeping records of heritage property today are many and varied. Several formats are available to keep a visual record of the original state of museum collections. Everybody

can use whatever means are available and no one could argue that there is nothing. The same method is used for both manual and electronic inventories. What is important is to have this registration conducted by qualified personnel, well-acquainted with the standards used.

Documenting heritage is important before, during and after states of disaster. The inventory can also help stop the unavoidable post-disaster situation when works are scattered, and can be used to monitor unauthorized movements and immediately circulate information to help bring the collections back together. An inventory is part of the fight against illicit traffic and makes it difficult for specialized unethical markets in this trade to operate.

In extremely tense situations of armed conflict, cultural symbols are often destroyed, thereby losing important and sometimes unique records of these communities. Such destruction, caused by ignorance and rash fury, has an irretrievable effect on all types of cultural property. The importance of documentation is essential in such cases and its circulation is vital, as it can help unmask potential offenders and have them recognised by the community.

Documentation is very useful in assessing the extent of the disaster and the value of the damaged work. It can help isolate looters and draw attention to the seriousness of their actions, attracting support in the community which is then aware of damage caused by destructive minorities. Museum personnel must therefore be competent in drawing up inventories and establishing catalogues which, in this type of situation, are the sole guarantees of preserving heritage.

### **Solidarity amongst Regional Organisations**

The real scourge in extreme situations is still ignorance: ignorance of preventive measures, of emergency procedures to follow and of actions to save property. There is devastating ignorance which rejects specific identities and differences, the diversity of heritage and its impact on the history of humanity at large, and ignorance unaware that all traces of the past stand as testimony to unique experiences, while also being heritage common to all of us.

The biculturalism or multiculturalism of certain communities may mean one culture predominates over another, producing a tense situation where arbitrary actions and ignorance can lead to the irretrievable loss of unique heritage which may not be "in fashion" at the time.

It is the responsibility of regional organisations to show communities the importance of different aspects of their history, without any prejudice in favour of one society or culture at the expense of another. Common initiatives to bring cultures together and make them aware of differences should be initiated by these organisations. They need to raise the awareness of their communities by organising common activities highlighting the fact that all cultural records of the past have intrinsic value and a real impact on our daily lives. Any losses can destroy records of our common origins forever.

### **Heritage, a commonweal we must share**

No one today can think in terms of an “exceptional emergency situation”, given the social, economic and geographical changes in the world. These situations are occurring more frequently, sometimes daily; they are becoming endemic and having an effect on all of us.

Solidarity must not be seen only in logistics, expertise and appraisal, but also as solidarity to raise morale which is equally essential. Too often, people in charge feel guilty and isolated in the midst of a drama.

The importance of collaboration between ICOM regional organisations is in the establishment of unified programmes to help set up systems to counter any hazards threatening any commonweal and to include the application of such procedures.

Interregional cooperation can play a role, offering temporary shelter for objects from an insecure country or region so that they can be protected and passed on to future generations without any damage or loss. This is how regional organisations can support heritage professionals who, in this kind of situation, often have a feeling of helplessness and isolation. Interregional cooperation may help these professionals feel they are supported and make them better equipped to respond to the disaster.

Regional associations have another duty which is to provide potential intervening parties with information and explanations of specific features and make them familiar with details which may seem petty but are essential for perpetuating cultural records. As parties intervening in different places and sometimes brought together to work in situations which are far from ideal and not without risk or tension, we now have an opportunity. There may be a possibility for establishing a rapid response brigade specialising in heritage within emergency structures and giving it international recognition which would solve a major difficulty in emergency cases, i.e. the problem of identifying a valid interlocutor who can take real action to defend heritage.

### **Conclusion: «Assistance to Heritage in Danger»**

I would like to make some remarks on the paper about the museum in Baghdad. I listened very carefully to the presentation of the situation at the Baghdad Museum and out of sheer professional honesty and respect for my Iraqi colleagues I wish to provide you with some information.

Far from opening a polemical debate on the “whys” and “wherefores” of “what” happened and is happening now in Iraq, since we are meeting here to deal with our museographic consensus, it is as a museum professional and representative of the Arab region that I feel duty bound to give a number of clarifications.

A number of terms appearing in the presentation create a precedent which might cause problems in the future, terms such as “fighting to take Baghdad”, or all the references to a military presence in a museum; these may fuel tension and animosity, which we certainly wish to avoid. I shall simply mention, and this is an event we must not forget, that it is the

military intervention which is the main and only cause that triggered the looting we witnessed helplessly and the loss of a major part of the world's heritage.

For museum professionals, the rescue of cultural property is a highly humanitarian act on a similar level to the respect for human rights when threatened in similar emergency situations.

Last June, at a meeting of ALECSO held in Tunis (Tunisia) and at other meetings, some facts were reported on the Baghdad Museum by colleagues from Arab countries. For the sake of honesty and out of respect for the Iraqi colleagues, I cannot let anyone believe that the Baghdad Museum was protected by outsiders: it was protected by the Iraqis themselves, who finally, in desperation, had to leave the premises for their own safety.

I also want to refer to another point which is essential. A few months before the beginning of the events in Iraq, the Iraqis were aware of the latent tension and took necessary preventive measures, transferring all valuable and movable objects from the regional museums to the Baghdad Museum where they were stored and secured.

We certainly realise that there were number of shortcomings given the prevailing circumstances. But I can state that the collections of Iraq were managed and safeguarded in a preventive fashion by the Baghdad Museum staff.

Finally I wish to mention one point that shocked me and which we should perhaps take into account for the recommendations of acts to be avoided and for the need to comply with concepts of cultural diversity. I am referring to a photograph showing a soldier in battledress in front of the Baghdad Museum. I do not believe this has provided us with any useful information on the safeguarding of museum collections. This symposium is trying to identify recommendations for prevention and intervention in disaster situations. The case of Iraq can help us identify a number of negative aspects in any interventionist actions and shows the need to respect the communities where we intervene.

To conclude, I would like to introduce the notion of "Assistance to Heritage in Danger". As we have just seen, a disaster is by nature an emergency situation that leads to disaster and drama because of its brutality and scale. When these situations become chronic, the notion of an emergency becomes quite relative. It is the same for certain endemic diseases.

The notion of cultural disaster is not, unfortunately, a common feature of public opinion which can be moved by the human consequences of an armed conflict, an earthquake or major flooding, far more than by the irredeemable loss of historic heritage caused by disasters. Hence the role of prevention, awareness raising and intervention that is incumbent upon heritage professionals, relevant authorities and governments.

The safeguarding of cultural heritage, already a difficult task in "normal times", requires means beyond the reach of countries which are victims of disaster. Surely the international authorities and NGOs responsible for

heritage conservation should be obliged to intervene, making use of expertise as well as the human, financial, technical and legal resources they have at their disposal.

The legitimacy of such interventionism could be founded as a form of "right" to provide "assistance to heritage in danger" and the corollary would be to determine different responsibilities. Such a "right" would therefore be the right to save cultural and eminently humanitarian property, just as the right of interference protects human rights.