

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

The illicit trafficking of cultural property is a transnational crime that impacts the so-called countries of “origin” (rich in cultural heritage), “transit”, and “destination” (principal marketplaces). The illicit trade in cultural goods is flourishing due to various factors, including the high demand in the art market, the relative ease of crossing certain borders, advancements in transportation systems and technology, and political instability in some countries.

Over the past decades, there has been an alarming increase in the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, especially from countries affected by armed conflict or social turmoil. Looted antiquities have become profitable assets, rivalling – to some degree – drugs, arms, and counterfeit goods. In order to combat this phenomenon, the international community has adopted several agreements: the **1970 UNESCO Convention** on the "Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property" and the **1995 UNIDROIT Convention** on "Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects" feature among the earliest and most relevant.

On the other hand, one of the most recent and impactful resolutions was adopted by the **United Nations Security Council in 2015**. The document calls upon countries to implement necessary measures to prevent looted/stolen cultural goods from Iraq and Syria to enter commercial circuits. Additionally, it acknowledges the global role of Interpol in addressing this illicit market, particularly through raising awareness among member states.

The resolution also highlights the importance of information exchange between law enforcement agencies, art and antique dealers, and collectors, as essential in tackling this issue.

In this context, **Interpol Database of Stolen Works of Art** and its **ID-Art mobile application** represent a crucial tool available to police forces and the public worldwide. Users can gather information on declared stolen artworks, recovered, yet still unclaimed cultural objects, and on those originating from conflict-affected countries.

In the fight against theft and trafficking of works of art, Interpol cooperates with several international organisations, including the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**, the **International Council of Museums (ICOM)**, the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**, and the **World Customs Organization (WCO)**. This collaborative effort enables a coordinated approach in addressing the challenges related to the illicit trade of cultural goods and promotes information sharing among these global entities.

Indeed, it is notable that the fight against international illicit trafficking of cultural goods engages various actors, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, policymakers, and, most importantly, national and border police authorities. Accordingly, in recent years, there has been an increase in collaborative efforts, and cooperation relationships among these entities have been strengthened.

Furthermore, the law enforcement agencies of several countries have equipped themselves with advanced tools, such databases and technologies, to enhance their effectiveness in combating this phenomenon and facilitate the prosecution of cases involving theft and illicit appropriation of cultural property. Regrettably, inadequate awareness among governments and the public often creates fertile ground for criminals, as they perceive such illicit trafficking as a high-profit, low-risk activity.

That emphasises the importance of raising awareness, implementing preventive measures, and fostering international alliance to deter and counteract the illegal trade of cultural goods.

According to the statistics published by Interpol in the "Assessment of Crime Against Cultural Property 2021" (2022), Europe is still massively impacted by this phenomenon. However, in recent years, the overall trend has been showing an increase in the recovery of stolen property, often facilitated by newly-established international cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

The illicit trafficking of cultural property is also a recurring topic of the recommendations issued from meetings of the **Interpol Expert Group (IEG) on Stolen Works of Art**, with the participation of UNESCO. In 2006, for the first time, the IEG on Stolen Works of Art specifically highlighted the matter of illicit online sales of cultural items. It also acknowledged the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in responding to the increasing phenomenon. As a solution, the IEG proposed that Interpol, UNESCO, and ICOM collaborate in creating and distributing to their respective member countries a shared list of fundamental actions to combat the growing illicit trade of cultural objects on the Internet.

As a result, the list of "**Basic Actions Concerning Cultural Objects Offered for Sale on the Internet**" was developed, thus marking the initial step towards a new approach in contrasting illicit trafficking, which recognises the responsibility of online platforms in the illegal sale of cultural property. The IEG on Stolen Works of Art recommended that the INTERPOL General Secretariat collects and regularly shares information from member countries regarding agreements made with Internet platforms, to have strong impact on the online sales of cultural property.

These agreements would involve restrictions on the sale of cultural property in accordance with national legislation, the implementation of self-monitoring mechanisms by Internet platforms, and the promotion of public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of protecting cultural heritage. Additionally, the recommendation encouraged Internet platforms, auction houses, and art dealers to grant law enforcement agencies unrestricted access to conventional and online catalogues. By fostering collaboration between various stakeholders, these measures aim to create a virtuous counter-network combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property.

RITHMS PLATFORM AND THE SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

Against this background, RITHMS project aims to enhance the operational capabilities of law enforcement agencies in tackling the growing challenges posed by the organised, multi-criminal, and transnational nature of illicit trafficking in cultural goods. This will be achieved through research, technological innovation, and targeted outreach and training initiatives. RITHMS Consortium acknowledges the need for a multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approach, considering the manifold essence of this crime and its interconnections with other criminal sectors. By adopting this line of work, RITHMS aims to strengthen the global response to the illicit trade of cultural goods and its associated criminal activities.

The project strives to develop a replicable strategy that effectively addresses the challenges associated with the illicit trade of stolen and looted cultural objects. These challenges primarily revolve around the fragmentation of intelligence information and the need to investigate the mechanisms underlying the phenomenon, including its links to different kinds of organised crime.

RITHMS aims to build and validate a prototype intelligence digital resource specifically designed for investigating illicit trafficking in cultural goods. The **innovative RITHMS digital platform** will stand out for interoperability and multifunctionality, enabling the identification, evaluation, and analysis of relationships between criminal and non-criminal actors. By outlining the networks engaged in the illicit trade of cultural property and their potential evolution, the platform will enhance the accessibility and accuracy of information available to law enforcement agencies. This advanced tool will empower authorities in their efforts to combat the illegal trade and better understand the dynamics guiding such criminal groups.

At its core, RITHMS platform will be based on **Social Network Analysis (SNA)**. SNA methodology allows for the mapping and analysis of social connections between individuals and groups of individuals by leveraging graph theory. In literature, SNA is defined as a structural approach in the field of social sciences based on the study of the interactions among social actors. The relationships considered for SNA are usually those linking individual human beings. Still, they may also involve other entities, such as objects, animals, or places, when they carry important meaning to the underlying social networks.

SNA is a valuable tool in criminal investigation, particularly in the fight against organised crime. SNA enables the identification and understanding of social networks and the connections among members of criminal organisations, shedding light on the dynamics and operations of these groups. It allows for identifying potential lines of inquiry and uncovering key actors or network vulnerabilities.

A **Social Network Graph (SNG)** will be the visual representation of the SNA conducted by RITHMS platform in accordance with the users' inputs and queries. Within a SNG, the entities under scrutiny feature as nodes, while the connections between nodes, which represent the relationships between entities, are depicted as lines or edges. These relationships are commonly referred to as ties or links. By displaying these entities and their relationships visually, a SNG provides a clear depiction of the (criminal) network under investigation.

RITHMS SNA platform will incorporate a comprehensive set of data collection modules to enhance the width and depth of information available to the end users. Automation will play a key role in gathering and correlating data from various sources.

That will encompass existing open-source datasets, mobile traffic data, satellite imagery analysis reports (connected to the *Copernicus* program), and a database powered by custom-developed crawler software designed to collect objects being auctioned or sold online. By connecting and integrating these diverse data sources, RITHMS SNA platform will provide a more comprehensive understanding of cultural goods trafficking networks and dependable intelligence for the investigative work of law enforcement agencies.

ESSENTIAL REFERENCES

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