

Appeal for contribution to the International Fund for the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation

11th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation

Phnom Penh, 6-9 March 2001

Thirty years after the adoption by UNESCO of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on The Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, many peoples continue to suffer from the loss of their unique and irreplaceable cultural heritage representing the memory of their forefathers. Theft, looting and illicit excavation continue on an appalling scale, thereby causing an endless depletion of peoples' cultural treasures.

There is a growing feeling in the international community that these peoples should be empowered to recover objects which they created and which best represent their culture.

Acceptance has increased worldwide for the 1970 UNESCO Convention, the universal legal instrument under whose provisions stolen and illegally exported artefacts can be claimed back. A number of major art trading States are now party to the Convention and others are working towards accession. While the number of demands for the restitution of cultural property steadily rises, more and more States are willing to assist in the return of these objects to their creators.

The likelihood of recovery of illicitly traded objects lessens the incentive of buyers to acquire objects whose provenance is dubious and thus helps dim the attraction of speculating heritage objects.

However, lack of resources still hampers many attempts at reclamation and it is clear that States making such claims cannot alone solve the problem of recovering their lost heritage. Funds are to be found for transportation of objects, suitable exhibition facilities provided and museum professionals properly trained.

When the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation was formed in 1978, it was recommended that a Fund be established in order to enable it to function effectively. It has now been established, and was launched on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the 1970 UNESCO Convention, on 15 November 2000.

I therefore solemnly appeal to all States and institutions to join in the international effort to contribute generously to the International Fund for the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation and thereby assist in the effective return of cultural property to its creators.

Koïchiro Matsuura
Director-General of UNESCO