

# Editorial

The work undertaken by UNESCO to promote the return of cultural property to its countries of origin was begun thirty years ago, during a decade that witnessed numerous developments in the field of heritage protection. In 1970 and 1972 two important conventions were passed by the General Conference of UNESCO. The first was aimed at the protection of heritage against illicit trafficking; the second gave a remarkable impetus to the promotion of world cultural and natural heritage. A third element was added in 1978, to strengthen existing provisions. Following an appeal by the Director-General of UNESCO, Member States established the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation.

The mandate of the Intergovernmental Committee, consisting of twenty-two members elected by the General Conference of UNESCO, is primarily to facilitate bilateral negotiations for the restitution or return of 'any cultural property which has a fundamental significance from the point of view of the spiritual values and cultural heritage of the people of a Member State or Associate Member of UNESCO and which has been lost as a result of colonial or foreign occupation or as a result of illicit appropriation'.<sup>1</sup> It must also 'encourage the necessary research and studies for the establishment of coherent programmes for the constitution of representative collections in countries whose cultural heritage has been dispersed'.<sup>2</sup> These two concerns guide UNESCO's efforts to utilize all resources in bilateral and international cooperation to meet the aspirations of countries concerned and the requirements of conservation of cultural property.

Since the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee, UNESCO through *MUSEUM International* has reported regularly on discussions regarding the delicate issue of the return of removed cultural property, on the requests formulated and reservations expressed, and on the claims and misunderstandings, in particular within the museum community. This dissemination function echoes the mission of the organization as a whole: notably to work as a laboratory of ideas and as a catalyst for international cooperation.<sup>3</sup> The organization of forums on the issue of return and restitution, and the dissemination of their results, can stimulate the

development of the public awareness necessary to change attitudes and for the emergence of responsible attitudes on the part of all involved.

This issue of *MUSEUM International* publishes the proceedings of an important conference intended to take forward the debate on the issue of the return and restitution of cultural property. Held in Athens on 17 and 18 March 2008, at the initiative of the Government of Greece, the conference brought together key actors to advance practice on this issue. On behalf of UNESCO I thank Greek authorities, for initiating this conference and for the resources – notably financial – that they have deployed and dedicated to the success of the Athens Conference. The proceedings follow the format of the conference. The first chapter is devoted to the presentation and exchange of successful experiences in the return of cultural property. The next four chapters reflect current debates on the main legal, ethical, diplomatic and scientific components relating to this issue. A summary of the conference, together with its conclusions, is presented at the end of the final chapter, by the Director of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Elena Korka.

In communicating widely on the state of the debate on these issues, UNESCO participates in the advancement of an ethic of heritage. It strives to allow everyone equal enjoyment of cultural property as humanity's common heritage, created by the genius of peoples.

**Françoise Rivière**

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR - GENERAL FOR CULTURE

DIRECTOR OF THE PUBLICATION

## | NOTES

1. Article 3.2 of the Statutes of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation.
2. Article 4.3 of the Statutes of the Intergovernmental Committee.
3. UNESCO Mid-Term Strategy for 2008–2013.