

Italian Embassy Spotlights Efforts to Protect Humanity's Heritage

By Anna Gawel

Uploaded on April 26, 2016

Art is a source of pride for countries. It can also be a source of income that fuels crime and conflict, robbing nations of their storied pasts. The trafficking of antiquities is a multibillion-dollar global enterprise — a phenomenon starkly illustrated by the Islamic State, which has ransacked ancient archeological sites to bankroll its rampage through Iraq and Syria.

While the Islamic State's exploitation of national treasures has shined a light on the issue, cultural heritage can be threatened for any number of reasons, from opportunistic looters to urban development.

As part of the Italian presidency of EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture), the Italian Embassy is hosting a series of events around the theme of "Protecting our Heritage" through 2016. The initiative examines ways to safeguard and preserve the cultural heritage of humanity in the face of war, international terrorism, crime syndicates, climate change and the simple passage of time.

"We are the caretakers of the cultural legacy inherited from past generations," said Italy's former ambassador to the U.S., Claudio Bisogniero, in a press release. "The aim of 'Protecting our Heritage' is to help bring the international community together in an effort to save our shared and most beloved memories."



"Rovine Palmira #2" by Massimiliano Gatti was on display at the Embassy of Italy as part of an exhibit that explored the toll Syria's civil war has wrought on the ancient desert city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Center. Photo: Massimiliano Gatti / Italian Cultural Institute

Franco Impalà, first secretary at the Italian Embassy, told the Diplomatic Pouch that while change and progress are inevitable, they should not come at the expense of the past. "We're not trying to say that nothing can change and everything has to stay the same, but this is our shared history. There's a reason it's still here."

That history is constantly being endangered not only by violence, extremism and environmental degradation, but also by simple human neglect, Impalà added, citing the example of the sinking Italian city of Venice and its perennial battle against water. But he stressed that "Protecting our Heritage" is not just about Italy — the program spans the world and spotlights national treasures that "belong to our common humanity."

He said the embassy hopes to support roughly 30 events this year, with the latter half of the year focused on "intangible" heritage such as language and traditions such as dances and cooking (something the Italians know quite a bit about).

Impalà noted that the embassy is still combing through hundreds of proposals it has received for potential partnerships. He said the goal is to bring together disparate events — some sponsored by the Smithsonian or other embassies, for instance — under one umbrella.

Recent events include a surprise concert at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial by Italy's famous Carabinieri Band, one of the greatest military orchestras in the world, founded in 1820. The impromptu performance on April 17 for passersby on the National Mall preceded the band's musical tribute at the Kennedy Center honoring those who have risked their lives to defend cultural heritage, such as the Monuments Men — who were tasked with saving art from Nazi destruction and theft during World War II.



Raymond Villanueva, deputy assistant director of international operations for the Department of Homeland Security, participates in a panel discussion at the Italian Embassy celebrating the five-year extension of a memorandum of understanding between Italy and the United States that aims to curb the trafficking of relics and strengthen cooperation through academic and scientific initiatives. Photo: Kelsey Brannan, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

The Italian Embassy itself has also served as a venue to showcase efforts to preserve the world's heritage. In a recent exhibit, Italian photographer Massimiliano Gatti explored the toll that Syria's civil war has wrought on the ancient desert city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Center that is home to monumental ruins and once stood at the crossroads of several great civilizations.

The show coincided with the Syrian government's advance on the city, retaking it from Islamic State militants with help from Russian airpower. While some landmarks had been destroyed by the terrorist group, others had been spared, although the Syrian government said it was still surveying the damage. Images of Palmyra's archeological treasures, some of which may no longer exist, graced the walls of the Italian Embassy as a reminder of the vulnerability of the past to modern-day forces.

Through May 18, the embassy is presenting the exhibition "South Arabia Revisited: The Work of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen." Archaeologists have long been fascinated by the remains of architecture, sculptures and artifacts in South Arabia, a historical region that encompasses the Arabian Peninsula and is mostly centered around present-day Yemen — which, like Syria, has seen its fair share of violence and civil war. A collection of archival documents, photographs, notebooks and drawings highlight stories from the field and collaborative efforts that showcase important sites such as Bar'qish and Tamna.

In addition, a series of lectures has examined the scourge of antiquities trafficking, a prolific and highly lucrative business that is taking place on an immense scale in the war-torn Middle East.

On March 23, the embassy hosted a panel discussion marking the five-year extension of a memorandum of understanding between Italy and the United States. The agreement aims to curb the trafficking of relics from the pre-classical, classical and Imperial Roman time periods, while strengthening cooperation through academic and scientific initiatives.

"Archeological sites continue to fall prey to looting and pillage, so we must continue our partnership," U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Evan Ryan said of the MOU, now in its 15th year.

Raymond Villanueva, deputy assistant director of international operations for the Department of Homeland Security, said DHS collaborates with the State Department, other law enforcement agencies and foreign governments "to make bad actors' world very small."

The self-described "art junkie" said this collaboration "is growing by the minute."

"If you're coming here to steal my heritage and launder that money to fund illicit activities or to launch terrorist attacks in Brussels, Paris ... we're going to use all of the tools at our disposal to put you behind bars."

Villanueva noted that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) branch boasts over 700 agents and a network of 62 offices in 16 countries. HSI plays a critical role in criminal investigations that involve the illicit importation and distribution of cultural property, as well as the illegal trafficking of artwork. It also specializes in recovering works that have been reported lost or stolen and repatriating them to foreign governments.

In April, for instance, it seized an ancient Attic Red-Figure Nolan Amphora vase dating to 460 B.C. from a New York City art gallery after a tip from the Italian government, which said the piece matched photographs found in the files of convicted antiquities dealer Gianfranco Becchina.

Villanueva said that since 2007, HSI has returned over 8,000 pieces of art and antiquities to over 30 countries. The recovered loot includes paintings from France and Poland; 15th- to 18th-century manuscripts from Italy and Peru; dinosaur skeletons and eggs from Mongolia; and cultural artifacts from China, Cambodia and Iraq.



Italian Ambassador Armando Varricchio, left, sits with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Evan Ryan as they listen to a panel discussion on how the U.S. and Italy are fighting antiquities trafficking as part of the program “Protecting our Heritage.” Photo: Kelsey Brannan, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State

In a sign of how far-reaching this cross-national cooperation has become, Villanueva pointed out that his agency is currently working on a case to return documents to Cuba following Washington’s diplomatic rapprochement with Havana.

A taskforce of NGOs recently recommended providing additional resources to buttress HSI’s “seize and repatriate” strategy with investigations and prosecutions that dismantle criminal networks engaged in the antiquities black market.

In mid-April, the Antiquities Coalition, Asia Society and Middle East Institute released “#CultureUnderThreat: Recommendations for the U.S. Government,” outlining a series of steps to confront growing threats to our cultural heritage and global security.

“Cultural racketeering — the global trade in looted antiquities — is a multibillion-dollar industry that funds organized crime and terrorists like Daesh [also known as the Islamic State]. Cultural cleansing — the systematic destruction of a targeted group and its heritage — has been used by Daesh, al Nusra, and other terrorist organizations to terrorize populations under their control,” the report said.



This front and side view of an antiquity was found in the electronic media of Abu Sayyaf, a top Islamic State militant who was killed last year and helped the group smuggle antiquities and oil. Photo: U.S. Department of State

Among its recommendations, it called for the U.S. president to block the import of conflict antiquities through executive action and to designate a senior director at the National Security Council to drive U.S. policy in the fight against blood antiquities and terrorist financing. It is also urged Congress to pass the Protect and Preserve Cultural Property Act that would restrict antiquities imports from Syria, and to grant the limited waiver requested by the State Department to rejoin UNESCO.

In addition, it recommended that the Defense Department consider launching airstrikes when extremist groups threaten heritage sites and train military personnel on cultural heritage to better prepare the modern “Monuments Men and Women” for future missions.

“As the United States is both a target of Daesh and a major destination for stolen antiquities, it is a national security imperative to disrupt illicit antiquities trafficking,” said Deborah Lehr, chairman of the Antiquities Coalition.

Lehr — writing alongside Wendy Chamberlin, president of the Middle East Institute, in a Huffington Post article last year — described a repatriation ceremony in which the U.S. government returned smuggled antiquities such as a 2,600-year-old sarcophagus to Egypt.

“But it was only a snapshot of a long war of cultural annihilation that the Middle East and the United States are losing to international criminal networks and extremist groups like [the Islamic State],” Lehr and Chamberlin wrote.

“From the start of the Arab Spring in 2011 through 2013, declared imports of antiquities from five Middle Eastern countries rose a staggering 86 percent, and legal imports to the United States from Iraq alone have risen over 1,000 percent. The illicit trade, while difficult to measure, is believed to be significantly higher,” they noted.

The State Department estimates that the Islamic State may have raised over \$1 billion in 2014 alone, through a combination of oil sales, extortion, taxes and the plundering of natural resources. While it is not known how much of this was derived from antiquities trafficking, Andrew Keller of the State Department’s Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs said there is no doubt the group is earning a tidy profit from looting some of the 5,000 archeological sites under its control.

“On May 16 [2015], U.S. Special Forces raided the Syrian compound of Abu Sayyaf, the head of ISIL’s oil and gas, and antiquities division,” Keller said during a September speech at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, referring to another acronym for the Islamic State. “Documents obtained in this raid demonstrate that ISIL is well-organized to traffic in looted antiquities, that it devotes considerable administrative and logistical resources to this activity and, most importantly, that it profits from this activity.”

On that front, the Islamic State is continuing a long tradition of using heritage as a weapon of war.

“This war is about more than relics,” the authors argued. “The connection between the erasure of heritage and human atrocities is long-standing, as oppressors obliterate the past by erasing symbols of conquered cultures. From Caesar’s arson of the Library of Alexandria to the Nazis’ destruction of synagogues to the Taliban’s demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, eliminating cultural identity is a strike against the spirit of a people.”