

# Art forum in NY

19TH SEPTEMBER 2016

Terrorists are using culture as a weapon of war, financing themselves through cultural racketeering, a “Culture Under Threat” forum has heard. Organized by the Antiquities Coalition, Asia Society, and the Middle East Institute, it ran at the Asia Society in New York on the margins of the 71st Session of the [United Nations](#) General Assembly.

Josette Sheeran, President and CEO of Asia Society, in her welcoming remarks said: “We’re here today to make sure that one issue, in all the issues being tackled during the UN General Assembly, is not overlooked and gets the attention it needs and deserves. That issue is protecting our shared heritage, the monuments and relics of our past, which are being destroyed, looted and trafficked. Make no mistake, these are hardcore and dangerous crimes as the proceeds are often being used to finance terrorism and further destruction.”

The Forum brought together intergovernmental bodies, governments, law enforcement agencies, the armed forces, and business. A discussion moderated by ABC News’ Jon Williams focused on how these varied sectors can work together to combat the growing use of historical and cultural artifacts as a terrorist financing tool. The event also explored what has been learned in the past year about this illicit trade in “blood antiquities” — including the US government’s revelation that ISIS has made antiquities transactions totaling \$1.25 million over just three months.

Speakers included Ambassador Mohamed Ali Alhakim, Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations; Brigadier General (Retired) Russell Howard, Founding Director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point; Deborah Lehr, Chair and Founder of the Antiquities Coalition; Luigi Marini, Legal Advisor at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations; Emmanuel Roux, Special Representative of [INTERPOL](#) to the United Nations; Larry Schwartz, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Press and Public Diplomacy; and Mark Taplin, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Roux said at the event: “We need, at the same time, a comprehensive and a very specialized approach to this kind of crime. [INTERPOL] found recently, a year ago, a container. In this container, we found 135 cultural objects, 233 weapons, firearms, together with 30 kilos of heroin, three kilos of cocaine, and 23 elephant tusks. All those markets, that you think are specialized, at some point they gather.”

On September 8, 17 Arab League nations convened in Amman for a ministerial-level summit hosted by the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan with support from the Antiquities Coalition and the Middle East Institute. The participating nations held the inaugural meeting of the Middle East and North African Task Force Against Cultural Racketeering, and launched an aggressive plan to combat looting and trafficking.

In April 2016, the forum organizers released the #CultureUnderThreat [Task Force Report](#): Recommendations for the US Government, which put forward 31 concrete steps that could be taken by the US Administration, Congress, the United Nations, and the art market.

For an app that shows 330 cultural crimes committed by Daesh (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and other extremist groups in the Middle East and North African region, visit <http://taskforce.theantiquitiescoalition.org/>.