



PRESS RELEASE

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A new platform for the diplomacy of cultural heritage

Paintings, sculptures, ceramics, archaeological remains: many cultural objects resulting from past spoliations still lie dormant in museums and in the attics of private individuals. To encourage their restitution, the University of Geneva (UNIGE) is launching a platform in the diplomacy of cultural heritage. The platform seeks to assist States, communities, museums and individuals in returning these objects to their owners or countries of origin. This initiative aims in particular to promote transitional justice by participating in the recognition of certain past abuses. To date, the UNIGE has already participated in several restitutions, including those of an 18th century Cypriot icon at the end of February of this year and a 2nd century Roman sarcophagus in September 2017.

UNIGE is launching a platform for cultural diplomacy to support the restitution of looted cultural property.

What are the steps to be taken to return a cultural object held illegally, whether voluntarily or not? After having put online the **ArThemis** database (2010), intended to list decisions in this area, the Art-Law Centre of UNIGE is launching a platform for the diplomacy of cultural heritage. The aim is to offer States, communities, institutions and individuals a physical and **virtual** place to declare the possession of an object of delicate provenance in complete confidentiality. The platform will also provide support throughout the restitution process.

“We want to encourage people who own these type of objects to return them. Those wishing to recover objects of which they have been dispossessed will also be able to call on us,” explains Marc-André Renold, director of the Art-Law Centre at the UNIGE and initiator of the platform. Training courses on the legal principles for obtaining restitution will also be offered and one is planned in the next few months in Senegal.

Promoting transitional justice

“This is truly a platform for cultural diplomacy, continues Marc-André Renold. Returning these types of objects or works of art can indeed be very useful in improving relations between certain countries and communities by promoting so-called transitional justice.” Such an approach can, among other things, contribute to the recognition of certain abuses committed in the past, by one or other of the actors involved. “In the long term, the ambition is to make Geneva a key platform in this field, as it is already, for example, in the field of international commercial arbitration.”



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The Art-Law Centre of the UNIGE participated in the restitution of a Cypriot icon to its country of origin on 23 February.

High resolution pictures

Marc-André Renold has accompanied several important restitutions over the last ten years. In 2017, his involvement led to the return of a 2nd century Roman sarcophagus to its country of origin, Turkey. Discovered in a warehouse of the Geneva freeport, it was held by an antiquities dealer who had inherited it from his father. The specialist stresses: “Such objects may be the product of illicit trafficking in cultural property, but it also happens that people or institutions find themselves unknowingly in possession of such objects.”

Restitution in progress

More recently, Marc-André Renold was instrumental in the return of an 18th century Cypriot icon to the Church of Cyprus. The icon had been acquired in Cyprus in the 1970s by an English officer serving on the island during the conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turks. According to the wishes of the soldier’s son, who called on the services of the Art-Law Centre of the UNIGE, the painting was handed over to the country’s religious authorities on 23 February. Within the framework of the new platform, a new restitution is being processed. It concerns two Roman vases acquired by a couple from Geneva in the 1970s and illegally exported from Italy. Their descendants now wish to return them to Italy, their country of origin.

The platform team is currently composed of three collaborators: Marc-André Renold, Alessandro Chechi (lecturer at the Art-Law Centre) and Morgane Desboeufs (assistant at the Art-Law Centre).

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