

Guns and drugs or art and antiques?

How organised crime networks are threatening cultural heritage by trafficking irreplaceable artefacts.

Cultural artefacts and historic sites around the world are being threatened by organised crime groups who traffic the items for lucrative profits, a team of researchers from The University of Queensland found.

Criminal Law [Professor Andreas Schloenhardt](#) is convenor of the UQ-led [Transnational Organised Crime](#) program, which this year focuses on the trafficking of cultural items, including Australian Indigenous artefacts and art.

“This is a sophisticated, business-style form of organised crime with a lucrative global market,” Professor Schloenhardt said.

“Trafficking in artefacts is very organised because the origin, the place of sale and the consumer might be thousands of kilometres apart.

“And crime networks have to be sophisticated to move these items across international borders by way of documentation, packaging, methods of transport - or in extreme cases, bribing of officials to turn a blind eye.”

FIVE NATIONS MEET TO FIGHT CRIME

The annual UQ Law School program is a collaboration with the University of Zurich (Switzerland), University of Vienna (Austria), University of Cologne (Germany) and this year’s host, the University of Ferrara in Italy.

Students from UQ have travelled to Ferrara join their counterparts, leading experts and scholars in exploring the origins and movement of artefacts and antiquities, as well as the patterns and people involved in this crime type.

They will also examine the laundering and confiscation of proceeds, international and national legal frameworks, restitution and what more should be done to suppress such trafficking.

“There has been significant looting in areas of conflict like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Cambodia where items of historical and cultural value disappeared,” Professor Schloenhardt said.

“Sometimes museum collections are raided and then suddenly those items surface on the black market.

“In the post-colonial world, museums and other collectors are now thinking about where these items came from.”

Professor Schloenhardt said Australia is both a destination and source of artefacts and antiquities that are traded illegally around the world and within Australia.

“More needs to be done to protect Aboriginal art and artefacts in Australia which have gained in value tremendously overseas in recent years,” he said.

“These objects are traded through major galleries and brokers, but also through illicit channels which means there are parallel legal and illegal markets.”

Professor Schloenhardt said as well as black-market routes, sellers use platforms like Facebook Marketplace, Reddit and eBay to move items – with very few repercussions.

LEGAL REFORM NEEDED

“We need to think about how to make this a less profitable crime and use international cooperation to go after these objects and the perpetrators, seize their assets and facilitate the return of these items,” Professor Schloenhardt said.

“We're really lagging behind in having a solid legal framework to protect cultural artefacts and penalise the illicit trade, particularly in Australia.

“For much of our history, we have done too little to protect Indigenous art and artefacts and the theft and trafficking of these objects is often not considered - by some - to be serious crimes.

“Even where offences do exist, the penalties are very low and do not reflect the items’ cultural significance and their market value.”

University of Ferrara Professor Serena Forlati said while there were strict regulations safeguarding cultural heritage in Italy, criminal networks still trafficked artefacts by way of looting or using valuable artworks to launder proceeds of crime.

“As many stolen artifacts and antiquities are taken to other countries, international cooperation among relevant law enforcement authorities – but also with museums, galleries and auction houses – is key to any hope of controlling trafficking,” she said.

Course participant and UQ student Kate Moulds said the illicit trade of artefacts posed a serious threat to Aboriginal cultures.

“More than 150 artefacts were seized from a house in Western Sydney in 2017 after having been illegally exported from Tasmania and listed for sale online,” Ms Moulds said.

“Yet, no one was prosecuted.

“Given the illicit trade in Aboriginal artefacts is not well understood, there is concern the trade could increase given the demand for these items globally.”

UQ student Angus Watson said when it came to clamping down on the illicit trade of artefacts, the weakness of the Australian system was its complexity.

“With three main Federal pieces of law covering cultural heritage and antiquities plus up to three different Acts for each State and Territory, an effort to harmonise and streamline the system would be welcome,” Mr Watson said.

Students from the five universities will present their initial findings from February 10-14 with research projects to be completed in May 2025.