

## Past Failures for Future Learning

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Resumen

### **Sacar lecciones de los desastres del pasado con vistas al futuro**

La situación internacional imperante en estos últimos años ha obligado a muchas organizaciones internacionales y a sus comités especializados -el ICOM-CC, entre otros- a efectuar una labor encaminada a luchar contra la reiteración de las destrucciones y los tráficos ilícitos de bienes culturales para que la población mundial no tenga que asistir, inerte, a su deterioro. En su calidad de elementos importantes dotados de las competencias que exige cualquier intervención relativa a los bienes culturales, los comités especializados deben ser consultados tanto en la fase preparatoria de elaboración de decisiones como en la fase de realización de las actividades que impongan las situaciones de urgencia. Esta necesidad evidente de consulta no siempre se tiene en cuenta.

Toda colaboración eficaz en un campo especializado exige la participación de organismos que posean la experiencia y los conocimientos teóricos y prácticos necesarios. El ICOM-CC, que agrupa a profesionales de la conservación, cuenta con medios técnicos y humanos que le permiten participar con eficacia y dinamismo en proyectos relacionados con el tratamiento de las repercusiones de los desastres provocados por la naturaleza y el hombre.

Résumé

### **L'apprentissage des blessures du passé pour le futur**

La situation internationale de ces dernières années oblige de nombreuses organisations internationales et leurs comités, dont l'ICOM-CC, à œuvrer contre les destructions répétées et le trafic illicite qui affectent le patrimoine culturel pour ne pas laisser la population mondiale être le seul témoin des atteintes portées aux cultures. En tant que premiers acteurs compétents d'intervention, ces derniers doivent être consultés dans les décisions préparatoires et les actions liées aux situations d'urgence bien que cette évidence ne soit pas toujours respectée.

La réalisation d'une collaboration efficace dans un domaine spécialisé se constitue en amont par l'implication de structures dotées d'une expertise et de savoir-faire. L'ICOM-CC regroupe des professionnels de la conservation et dispose de moyens humains et techniques pour participer efficacement et activement aux projets liés à des catastrophes causées par la nature et par l'homme.

It was a terrifying Winter and Spring in 2003, one in which the vulnerability of cultural heritage emerged in new and unexpected forms with the looting of the museums in Iraq. We have had to face up to our political impotence. Is this also the case for the display of professional strength as seen with the reaction of the museum community? Questions as to whether international, regional and national organisations involved in the preservation and safekeeping of our cultural heritage were lacking in co-ordination are more relevant than ever.

The worldwide outcry when the Buddha statues in the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan were blown up in 2001 was a reaction of collective concern rarely experienced to such a wide extent across the world. The experience of the destruction of cultural sites and collections during the first Iraq war, in 1991, and during the Balkan wars of the same decade, led many organisations, including ICOM-CC, to warn against a repetition of destruction and illicit trade during the aftermath of what has become known as the second Iraq war<sup>1</sup>. Once again the world's population witnessed how cultures suffer, and, although mostly overlooked in the daily stream of news, it is something that is happening repeatedly and extensively, and also on other continents such as Africa.

Plenty of work remains to be done by the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS)<sup>2</sup> which is working for the protection of the world's cultural heritage, and also to further ICOM activities. This is the reason for ICOM fostering a range of programmes, together with its international committees — in particular ICOM-CC, ICTOP and ICMS — to disseminate information on the vulnerability of the world's heritage and to support museum professionals in situations of armed conflict or natural disaster. The ICOM project, the Museums Emergency Programme (MEP) which is the reason for us being here in Hyderabad, will address these issues; it has been developed in collaboration with the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and ICCROM<sup>3</sup>.

I would first like to present a short account of how ICOM-CC saw the Spring and Summer of 2003 pass by without being offered any possibility for constructive dialogue with likeminded organisations. This account is not intended to be exhaustive and will therefore only present a limited view of the multitude of reactions and discussions, but it will tell a story about concerns and frustrations that have scarred the views held by ICOM-CC on international collaboration.

After ICOM-CC had issued the above-mentioned warning on the dangers of war for cultural heritage, a great variety of reactions emerged. The following statement was posted on the Museum-List: «In response to the question from Martinson 'Is this list a proper forum for political statements?' I for one, thank the chairman of ICOM-CC for providing timely information, of which little such is forthcoming these days from the 'official' purveyors of dis-information. Such matters ought to be of interest to us as professionals/responsible individuals/communities of varied interests."<sup>4</sup> In ICOM-CC we received several comparable statements, and after having also shared our concern with the UN, UNESCO, etc. we were hoping for dialogue, perhaps via ICOM, on how we could participate in planning the reconstruction of Iraq after the conflict.

Shortly after this event, McGuire Gibson, professor of Mesopotamian archaeology at the University of Chicago and head of the American Association for Research in Baghdad<sup>5</sup>, in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* on April 13, said: «I stressed that the most important site of all, the No. 1, is [the National Museum in Baghdad]. Because of this, I assumed that it would be secured as soon as they [the soldiers] were in the neighbourhood». His assumption was disastrously wrong, and the following day ICOM-CC circulated a statement reporting on the looting in Iraq. We stressed that it was with the utmost anxiety that ICOM-CC had been witnessing the looting of and damage to cultural property in the aftermath of war in Iraq. When ICOM-CC, and shortly after the ICBS as well as other international organisations, warned about the consequences of war, we emphasised the significance and crucial importance of the Hague Convention to all regimes<sup>6</sup>, and ICOM-CC urged the so-called Coalition Forces to act according to its intention.

There simply is no excusable exception for not following these universal rules of civilised conduct. ICOM-CC expressed the hope that inventories of the holdings of looted Iraq museums would be distributed to Interpol as soon as possible and distributed widely (via e-lists) to the entire museum world, so as to identify the stolen antiquities on the market for their restitution or seizure<sup>7</sup>. This happened subsequently when, inter alia, ICOM published an Emergency Red List of Iraqi Antiquities at Risk on its home page<sup>8</sup>.

As we began receiving disturbing evidence of the destruction of cultural sites and museums, ICOM-CC publicly offered conservation expertise. On April 16, I wrote: «I realise that the ICOM-CC statement on the looting of museums in Baghdad, Mosul, and elsewhere in Iraq will have no effect on what has already happened, albeit a psychological one, however, we can hope to ensure that incidents like these are better prepared for in future conflicts. Despite that, we naturally have to recognise that the damage has happened and offer our help and assistance to save what remains. In collaboration with ICOM and its international committees, ICOM-CC is offering its very broad conservation expertise. ICOM-CC will be prepared to find a team of professional conservators and conservation specialists that, as a task force, can be sent into Iraq and help recover the museums»<sup>9</sup>.

In this context, let me quote Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, who, on BBC radio (April 16, 2003) emphasised the following two points of action: FIRST the museums and institutions should be sealed, not swept and tidied, to try to save smashed objects; SECOND, he called for an «international coalition» of museum specialists to assist Iraq. This opinion was fully in accordance with the beliefs of ICOM-CC and we, via my e-mail, offered immediate participation in this «international coalition» to aid the Iraq museum professionals<sup>10</sup>.

Obviously the situation in Iraq did not require the immediate conservation of objects. Conservation action was not a practical possibility in the absence of trained staff, operational labs, any functional equipment and any environmental controls in many of the museums. What we could offer was assistance in conservation planning and management, plus assistance with temporary stabilisation of objects where required. A response to our outstretched helping hand was

commented upon by the following letter: «Dear Mr. Wadum, As an art historian, I was greatly appreciative of the recent outcry by ICOM-CC against the looting of museum objects in Iraq, and learning about the active role that ICOM will play in preventing these objects from reaching the international art market [...]»<sup>11</sup>.

At this point the president of ICOM Mr. Jacques Perot, who had attended the Expert Meeting on Iraqi Cultural Heritage held at UNESCO on 17 April 2003, shared information on the outcome of the meeting and a set of agreed recommendations to those responsible for civil order in Iraq<sup>12</sup>. Perot further strongly advised that the fact-finding mission to be organised in the very near future should be international and multidisciplinary. As we know, this mission was only possible at a much later stage, and did not include any official member of ICOM or of its international committees such as ICOM-CC, ICMS or ICTOP.

Later in April 2003, the president of the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisations (ECCO), Ms. Player-Dahnsjö wrote to me saying that she had received the bulletins from ICOM regarding the UNESCO expert meeting on Iraqi cultural heritage, but that she was mainly writing "to offer the services of ECCO" for the work that needed to be done after the latest Iraq war<sup>13</sup>. Player-Dahnsjö continued by asking: «Would the most sensible thing be to join forces at this point, in order to ensure that the various initiatives currently being developed have effective access to the best expertise within the various categories of cultural heritage?» ICOM-CC's answer to this rhetorical question is obvious. She further expressed the opinion that specific guidelines were required for conservators and others with similar interests who may come into direct contact with looted material and would be in a good position to identify it as such.

ICOM-CC reacted to this by informing ICOM, UNESCO and numerous museum discussion lists about our continued concern and the increasing momentum for assistance within our membership. Both ECCO and ICOM-CC received details of several individuals with specialist knowledge and interest in Iraq who have spontaneously offered to help with any work on a voluntary basis.

The events continued without any incorporation of ICOM-CC. So when the British press, on Tuesday, April 29 reported widely on a meeting that was held at the British Museum «bringing together experts from all over the world» to draft a plan, I would have expected both ECCO and ICOM-CC to have been invited to this meeting, even if it was only to make sure that their input was not purely reactive somewhere further down the line, and especially as we had offered assistance and therefore could have made useful contributions at earlier stages.

Jette Sandahl, director to the Världskulturmuseet (Museum of World Cultures), Gothenburg, Sweden, during a speech at the latest ICOM advisory committee meeting in June 2003 said, that «for international cultural organisations such as ICOM, it is as urgent as it seems insurmountable to counter the effects of global economic and political conflict. But impossible or overwhelming as it might seem, we don't really have the choice of turning our backs. We have no choice but to do our best. Museums cannot prevent domestic or international armed

conflicts, massacres; when the chips are down, we can hardly protect the heritage in our care. But neither can we let go of our responsibility as institutions of reconciliation, as the term was phrased around the National Museum of the American Indian. We can, I believe, strengthen our efforts at cross-cultural dialogue. We can, I think, become more active and proactive sites of reconciliation; become arenas for bridging differences, bridging disagreement and divergence, bridging cultures».<sup>14</sup>

Time has moved on since these dramatic events during the first half of 2003 and with the final report after the third UNESCO experts' meeting on the Safeguarding of the Iraqi Cultural Heritage, held in Tokyo on August 1, 2003, we can conclude that at no stage was ICOM-CC asked to become involved in solving the serious situation for sites and museums in Iraq. This, despite the fact that Mr. Perot, President of ICOM, continued to stress that ICOM was ready to help in different ways by providing experts or equipment, and asked for strong co-operation among different bodies in order to be efficient. Mr. Perot further offered to establish strong co-operation between ICCROM, ICOM and ICOMOS, in particular through the use of the expertise of the ICOM-CC Committee. It pleases us that our parent organisation did take us seriously and rightfully knew that we were ready to aid as «conservators without borders».

During Session 2 at the Tokyo meeting, the «Recommendations on the Iraqi Museum» note the need to sustain Iraqi museum personnel through training in specialized skills in the field of conservation techniques for the treatment of collections. To this end they recommend that UNESCO set up a long-term training programme for conservation in co-operation with ICOM, ICOMOS and ICCROM, under the auspices of UNESCO.

While to date ICOM-CC has not been consulted and therefore not been involved in any activity to safeguard Iraqi cultural heritage, we note with satisfaction, but also with some frustration, that running parallel to ICOM activities leading up to the current conference here in Hyderabad, other organisations are also developing emergency plans and even special bodies to facilitate aid to Iraq.

Here I am referring to the very recently inaugurated cultural emergency aid fund called "Cultural Emergency Response"<sup>15</sup>. The recent looting of cultural heritage in Baghdad triggered this initiative and the aim of the Cultural Emergency Response is to provide emergency aid to international cultural heritage that is damaged and threatened by war or natural disasters so as to prevent further loss. Each disaster will be assessed in terms of immediate needs; this will involve both local and international expertise and networks. The initiative came from the Dutch Prince Claus Fund and the co-founder is the International Committee of the Blue Shield. Four non-governmental organisations, International Council on Archives (ICA), International Council of Museums (ICOM), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) form the network.

To me this initiative certainly deserves respect, however, I also react with some astonishment. How did it come about that ICOM, ICOM-CC and ECCO were never consulted or invited to initial talks on the setting up of

this fund? Why are the resources not combined to avoid having one fund here and another somewhere else initially working for the same purpose? It must be possible to have a synergetic approach with international organisations aware of and informed on the safeguarding of cultural heritage. Otherwise we appear as divided and political as the UN Security Council did before the Iraq war began in March 2003. We cannot afford this, and most importantly the objects of cultural significance around the world, in areas of conflict or natural disaster, certainly do not deserve not to be given the best possible aid and with the best coordination possible. In our opinion, the reason ICOM-CC should have been included on a consultative basis at an early stage is that such collaboration will ensure that the action taken will be (and seen to be) well considered, more accountable, more effective and appropriate, and with a better outcome. If conservator-restorers were included from the very beginning, the planned actions may even have been cheaper, as appropriate assessments and decisions could be made earlier on in the process. It should be understood, that the membership of ICOM-CC is comprised of professional conservation managers and teachers, as well as skilled bench workers.

I sincerely hope that the MEP will actively integrate all relevant partners from the very beginning of any action. The past has shown too many well-intended but unproductive developments towards emergency preparedness and we must understand the need to combine our efforts for the future of the world's heritage.

<sup>1</sup> ICOM-CC Statement published 25 February 2003: "ICOM-CC and War. The ICOM-Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) is an international body of conservator-restorers that is committed to the preservation of all forms of the world's cultural heritage including material, natural, and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. ICOM-CC is highly concerned about the prospects of possible damage to our shared cultural heritage and loss of human life as a result of armed conflicts. All people, wherever they may live on the face of this earth, will not succeed and prosper without their cultural past. In our global village we must safeguard our past in order to guarantee our future. ICOM-CC therefore urges all political parties and international organisations appreciative of the world's multifaceted cultural past to take all means in their possession to spare our cultural heritage from damage or destruction. [signed] Jørgen Wadum, Chair ICOM-CC." Further recommended reading was: « UNESCO's Document on Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict »: [http://www.unesco.org/culture/legalprotection/war/html\\_eng/index\\_en.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/culture/legalprotection/war/html_eng/index_en.shtml), and the Statement by the International Committee of the Blue Shield on the impact of a war on cultural heritage in Iraq: <http://www.ifla.org/VII/4/admin/statement-iraq.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/icom/emergency.html>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/icom/risk\\_management.html](http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/icom/risk_management.html)

<sup>4</sup> Tuesday 11-3-2003 16:57 on the MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM, by Guha Shankar, University of Texas, Anthropology. The rest of the message read: "I subscribe to this list precisely because I want and need such diverse sources of information and to understand arguments about the worlds in which we live and work. Let's not have this forum degenerate into the cyber-space equivalent of a kaffee-klatch - full of hot air and signifying nothing - by excising those matters which are deemed political/offensive/out of line by the guardians of correctness".

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Gibson co-operated with the U.S. Army before the war, providing it with lists of thousands of sites in Iraq to be spared.

<sup>6</sup> The United States of America is not among the 103 signatories to the Convention. America is therefore not a High Contracting Party to the Convention and may not have broken it in commanding its troops to stand to one side as major museums were taken over by unarmed mobs. This is not necessarily the case, however. Iraq has ratified the Convention, and according to the legal principle of *lex situs* - the law of the place - the Convention may apply to any acts committed on Iraqi territory, regardless of the nationality of the perpetrator.

<sup>7</sup> See Statement distributed 14 April 2003: "ICOM-CC appalled by looting in Iraq. The International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) is witnessing the looting and damage of cultural property in the aftermath of war in Iraq with the utmost concern. When ICOM-CC (Feb 25, 2003) and shortly after the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) as well as other international organisations warned about the consequences of war, we stressed our concern for "... the prospects of

possible damage to our shared cultural heritage and loss of human life as a result of armed conflicts". ICOM-CC, with many other international organisations, must now again stress how significant and crucial The Hague Convention is to all regimes. It is imperative that all parties in Iraq realise their responsibilities towards cultural property. In the "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict", drawn up in The Hague, 14 May 1954, and entered in force 7 August 1956, Paragraph 1. "General provisions regarding protection", Article 4. "Respect for cultural property" section 3 reads: "The High Contracting Parties further undertake to prohibit, prevent and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property. They shall refrain from requisitioning movable cultural property situated in the territory of another High Contracting Party". ICOM-CC will hold all so-called Coalition Force Partners accountable for the looting and damage to cultural property in Iraq.

Further paragraph X, "Protocol for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict", article 1, reads: "The High Contracting Parties are agreed as follows: Each High Contracting Party undertakes to prevent the exportation, from a territory occupied by it during an armed conflict, of cultural property as defined in Article 1 of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, signed at The Hague on 14 May, 1954".

Article 3 expands on this role by saying: "Each High Contracting Party undertakes to return, at the close of hostilities, to the competent authorities of the territory previously occupied, cultural property which is in its territory, if such property has been exported in contravention of the principle laid down in the first paragraph. Such property shall never be retained as war reparations".

ICOM-CC urges the so-called Coalition Forces to act according to The Hague Convention. There simply is no excusable exception for not following these universal rules of civilised conduct.

ICOM-CC hopes that inventories of the holdings of looted Iraq museums as soon as possible can be distributed to Interpol and also widely (via e-lists) to the entire museum world in order to identify these stolen antiquities in the market for their restitution or seizure.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://icom.museum/redlist/irak/en/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> 16 April 2003 ICOM-CC offers conservation expertise.

<sup>10</sup> 30 April 2003 by e-mail: "Dear Neil [MacGregor], ...The reason I am e-mailing you is prompted by the situation in Iraq. Knowing that you and the BM are actively involved in assessing the current situation in the country I wanted to let you know that if you or your colleagues would want to draw on the versatile experience found among the professionals within ICOM Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC), then we are very much prepared to assist. I have informed the SG of ICOM about our vigilance, and Patrick Boylan of the ICBS knows this as well. During the past weeks I have received several e-mails from our members enquiring how to best aid the devastated Iraqi museums. Currently I am saving the e-mails from organisations and individuals until I receive information about how ICOM-CC can best participate in the preservation and conservation situation in Iraq. Having shared with you our commitment to assist makes me confident that if ICOM-CC should need the majority of relevant parties, you now know how to reach us. Best wishes, Jørgen Wadum - Chair ICOM-CC.

<sup>11</sup> From: Kristy K. Phillips (University of Minnesota, International Institute for Asian Studies) on Wednesday 16 April 2003 15:23 under the heading: Looting in Iraq: "Dear Mr. Wadum, As an art historian, I was greatly appreciative of the recent outcry by ICOM against the looting of museum objects in Iraq, and learning about the active role that ICOM will play in preventing these objects from reaching the international art market." ... "I think it is imperative that this information be distributed in a timely manner to professionals in order to prevent the initial stages of smuggling and the subsequent hiding of antiquities".

<sup>12</sup> Friday 18 April 2003 13:36 to ICOM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM with the heading UNESCO Expert Meeting on Iraqi Cultural Heritage - Resolutions - Message from the ICOM Secretariat. Jacques Perot, the President of ICOM, attended the Expert Meeting on Iraqi Cultural Heritage held at UNESCO on 17 April 2003. The meeting agreed on the following recommendations to those responsible for civil order in Iraq:

- That all museums, libraries, archives, monuments and sites in Iraq be guarded and secured immediately by the forces in place.
- That an immediate prohibition be placed on the export of all antiques, antiquities, works of art, books and archives from Iraq.
- That an immediate ban be placed on the international trade in objects of Iraqi cultural heritage.
- That a call be made for the voluntary and immediate return of cultural objects stolen or illicitly exported from Iraq.
- That there be an immediate fact-finding mission under UNESCO co-ordination to assess the extent of damage and loss to cultural property in Iraq.
- That there be the facilitation of international efforts in assisting cultural institutions in Iraq".

As stated in the message of 16 April, the ICOM Secretariat is at present compiling a list of existing documentation - databases, Web sites, exhibition catalogues - on Iraqi museum collections.

<sup>13</sup> Monday 21 April 4, 2003: "Dear Jørgen Wadum, I have received the bulletins from ICOM regarding the UNESCO expert meeting on Iraqi Cultural Heritage and am writing to offer the services of ECCO". (ECCO is an umbrella organisation representing professional bodies of conservator-restorers in Europe and probably shares many members with ICOM-CC. In addition ECCO has members who do not necessarily work with museum material, but also in archives and libraries or with historical environments. The strict membership requirements of ECCO ensure that members are professional conservator-restorers only.

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Jette Sandahl for providing me with her unpublished speech presented to the ICOM Advisory Committee, 63<sup>rd</sup> Session, 3-5 June 2002 in Paris (France).

<sup>15</sup> 26 September 2003 at the Prinsenhof Museum, Delft, The Netherlands.

See [http://www.princeclausfund.nl/source\\_eng/news/index\\_2003\\_irak.html](http://www.princeclausfund.nl/source_eng/news/index_2003_irak.html)