

StamfordMUN I

2026

CHAIR REPORT

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Evaluating the economic and ethical frameworks for the return of historical artifacts to countries of origin.

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1. Letter from the Chair(s)

Dear Delegates,

I am Xuanzhang 'Steve' Zhu, and I am honored to serve as the Head Chair for UNESCO at StamfordMUN this year. I am in Grade 10, and with four years of MUN experience as a delegate - as well as recently facilitating the first bilingual MUN committee in Singapore as a Chair - I look forward to guiding you all towards collaborative and fruitful debates.

The topic the committee tackles this year is very compelling, as it requires delegates to contemplate not just national sovereignty, but also the economics, ethics and history that has forced historical artifacts to end up displaced from their country of origin.

This is a very important topic, as historical artifacts often embody the culture and identity of certain nations, and the reasons for their displacement are commonly deep-rooted in history and politics on a global scale. Through this committee, I hope that delegates will learn to understand and navigate sensitive historical and political issues pertaining to various countries with nuance, respect, and most importantly, diplomacy.

As StamfordMUN is a beginner conference, if this is your first conference, we encourage you to step out of your comfort zone and speak up. If it is not, then we encourage you to guide those less experienced delegates and exercise the diplomacy and integrity present in MUN to set a strong example. Finally, if you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Chairs via email; Steve at xuzh2028@cis.edu.sg, Saby at 26sabiahj@sais.edu.sg or Berk at derin125734@gapps.uwcsea.edu.sg.

We look forward to seeing you at the committee!

Sincerely,

Xuanzhang 'Steve' Zhu

Head Chair of UNESCO

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2. Committee Overview

2.1 Committee History and Purpose

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a United Nations committee founded on November 16, 1945, amidst the wake of the Second World War. Initially focused on rebuilding important structures, such as schools and museums, destroyed by WWII in European nations, UNESCO has since then evolved to tackle issues of illiteracy and free education on a global scale. Following the vision of its precursor, the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), UNESCO's primary mandate focuses on collaboration between countries pertaining to education, science and culture, and the promotion of peace. In the current UN System, UNESCO acts as a specialised agency, functioning independently but still collaborates with the UN to support broader international goals.

2.2 Powers and Limitations

The UNESCO committee can debate and adopt resolutions that recommend actions to nations, as well as international initiatives, global guidelines and frameworks. However, UNESCO's resolutions are not legally binding; the committee relies on voluntary compliance from nations. If a nation does not comply, UNESCO is also not allowed for any enforcement action.

2.3 Voting Procedures

In UNESCO's General Conference, every member state has one vote. While the General Conference usually seeks to reach consensus, formally, a simple majority is required during procedural matters and a two thirds majority is used for more important decisions, such as budget matters or the adoption of new conventions.

3. Topic Introduction

3.1 Topic Overview

In summary, the committee's topic addresses the economic and ethical factors that should be considered when deciding whether an artifact that originates from and is situated in a different country should be returned to its country of origin. These artifacts usually hold significance to its country of origin culturally and historically, representing the identity of its country. However, it is important to consider the reason these artifacts are displaced, usually due to being taken away as spoils of war and never given back. Examples of this include: The Benin Bronzes, The Admonitions Scroll, The Rosetta Stone, and The Parthenon.

Unfortunately, the solution to this issue, as expected, is not as simple as simply demanding that all countries return historical artifacts to their rightful place. There is a need to consider the sovereign, economic, and ethical implications of the matter, whether that concerns the country that the historical artifact belongs to, or the country that holds the artifact. The solution would not only need to convince countries to give up artifacts that hold significant value, but also ensure that proper preservation, and, where appropriate, financial and logistical compensation are addressed to ensure that both parties are satisfied.

This is an issue that should garner international attention as the issue involves questions of justice to weaker nations, cultural preservation, and respect of sovereignty. Addressing it effectively would require dialogue between *all* member states to ensure that cultural heritage is preserved and respected.

3.2 Key Terms and Definitions

Below are some terms that delegates should know and use during debate on the topic.

Term	Definition
Artifact	A human-made object of historical and/or cultural significance.
Cultural Heritage	Artifacts and values that are passed down from previous generations of a culture.
Looting / Plunder	To take treasures / artifacts by force.
Compensation	Something, usually money, is given in exchange for the loss of something.
Sovereignty	The authority for a state to govern itself.
Repatriation	The return of something to its country of origin.
Restitution	The legal and financial restoration of the rights of a property to its rightful owner, often because it was taken away unlawfully.
Provenance	The place of origin for something.

4. Historical Background

4.1 Origins of the Issue

The earliest documentation of countries taking artifacts from others goes all the way back to around 3rd century BCE, in ancient Greece and Rome, where victors of war would take art and treasures from the regions they've conquered. In more traceable and modern history, however, the first and main source of debate for restitution can be traced back to the European power's colonialism, during the time when European countries conquered many nations in Africa, Asia and the Americas and took away their artifacts during that time. For example, the Benin Bronzes, a collection of Nigerian bronze statues that were looted from the country in 1897, mostly by the British, were once a major topic of debate for restitution. At the time, Great Britain refused to accept the responsibility of the colonial raid in which the Bronze Benin were taken. Later claiming they were better equipped to handle the artifacts, some smaller independent institutions have returned pieces from the larger collection, while some - most notably the British Museum - have offered long-term loans instead.

The root cause of the debate stems from the fact that during those days, stronger countries would and could take advantage of weaker countries and take their artifacts for little to no negotiation and consent. The many wars in history made it easy for countries to be in positions that allowed them to do this, such as the Napoleonic Wars and World War II. However, now that global power structures have shifted and international norms have evolved for the better, the countries that were plundered are asking for their prized artifacts back while the countries with the artifacts are arguing that they acquired the artifacts by legal means and have been preserving them for decades, hence deserving rightful ownership.

4.2 Key Historical Events

List 5-8 major events, treaties, or turning points in chronological order. Consider using a timeline format.

- 1815 - Congress of Vienna: With the defeat of Napoleon, part of the Congress of Vienna's duty was to return stolen artifacts to their rightful owners. This is one of the earliest examples of a large-scale restitution.
- 1954 - Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict: The first international treaty that tackles the issue of protection of cultural artifacts during wartime.
- 1970 - UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property: This convention was established to outlaw illegal trafficking of cultural property and promoted restitution efforts.
- 1978 - Establishment of UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP): As the name suggests, this UNESCO committee was established to promote and assist in restitution efforts globally.

- 2002 - Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: A declaration signed by Western Museums that argues that museums play a role in serving a global community and should retain its artifacts.
- 2021→ 2023 - Germany and British museums agree to return Bronze Benin, a major success in the restitution of global artifacts.

4.3 Evolution of International Response

Before the 20th century, not much was done to address the issue. Those that conquered other countries treated cultural objects belonging to other nations as spoils of war and few international opposition existed to stop them.

However, after WWII and the looting by the Nazis, the international community as a whole realised that cultural artifacts are objects of value that should be cherished, respected, and protected. Hence, countries avoided war, and more importantly, passed conventions like the Hague Convention that protected future plunderings from occurring. However, these conventions were non-retroactive, meaning that it does not address the artifacts that were already taken.

Beginning from 1970, many restitution efforts took place, and UNESCO played a large role in facilitating dialogue and promoting agreements in case-by-case negotiation, though legal barriers and resistance from museums slowed progress.

5. Current Situation

5.1 Present-Day Overview

The issue of returning historical artifacts is very active right now, with several major repatriation efforts happening around the world. Many countries that were colonized, invaded, or looted in the past are now formally asking for their cultural heritage back, and some museums and states are making progress.

For example, in June 2025, the Netherlands returned 119 looted Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, which is considered one of the largest single restitutions of its kind. These bronzes are important cultural objects that were taken during the 1897 British invasion of the Benin Kingdom. Nigeria has been actively seeking its return from Western museums and collections.

In late February 2026, Cambodia received 74 historic artifacts that had been illegally smuggled out of the country during times of conflict. These items range from pre-Angkorian period sculptures to ritual objects. Their repatriation highlights how deeply past conflict and illicit trade continue to affect cultural heritage.

Elsewhere, museums in the United States and Europe are also participating in restitution. For instance, several Thai artifacts looted in the 1960s were removed from display at a San Francisco museum in preparation for return to Thailand.

Even individual actions are contributing. A German woman voluntarily returned a 2,400-year-old relic to Greece in 2025, demonstrating that repatriation can happen at many levels.

At the same time, the debate continues over some of the most famous artifacts. Greece remains in long-term discussions with the British Museum about the Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles, and while there is growing public support in the United Kingdom for their return, a permanent transfer is not currently planned.

Overall, the trend is toward more restitution requests and some concrete returns, but progress varies widely depending on legal systems, museum policies, and diplomatic negotiations.

5.2 Key Stakeholders

Countries of Origin: These are the nations asking for artifacts to come home. They argue that museums in other countries have cultural treasures that rightfully belong to them. Examples include Nigeria, Greece, Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt, India, and many others.

Holding Countries and Museums: These include governments and major museums in Europe, North America, and Asia that currently possess disputed artifacts. Some are beginning to return objects, while others resist due to legal barriers or claims of better preservation.

UNESCO: UNESCO acts as a mediator and advocate for cultural property protection. It encourages negotiation and adherence to international conventions but cannot legally force restitution.

Local Communities and Indigenous Groups: Many return claims come from cultural communities who feel a deep connection to the objects, not just national governments. For example, Indigenous groups in Africa, Asia, and the Americas frequently emphasize spiritual or ancestral importance when seeking returns.

Academics, Lawyers, and NGOs: Experts help research provenance (ownership history) and support legal claims. Organizations like the Legacy Restoration Trust assist countries in negotiating with museums.

5.3 Current Challenges

Legal Barriers: Many countries have laws that protect museum collections from permanent removal. This makes full returns difficult, even when there is political will.

Provenance Gaps: Many artifacts lack clear documentation showing how they were taken. Without clear records, some museums argue they cannot legally return them.

Preservation Arguments: Some museums claim they can better protect ancient items, especially when countries of origin have limited resources. Critics argue this justification is unfair and rooted in colonial thinking.

Economic and Tourism Concerns: Museums in major cities often attract millions of visitors because of famous artifacts. Losing them could affect tourism revenue, while countries of origin argue they deserve economic benefits from their heritage.

Public Opinion and Cultural Identity: Public attitudes are shifting; polls show growing support in some countries for returning contested objects. This can influence government and museum policies, but also creates political pressure.

6. Past International Actions

6.1 UN Resolutions and Declarations

i. UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970)

This is one of the most important international agreements related to cultural property. It was adopted by UNESCO to stop the illegal trade of cultural objects. The convention requires countries to work together to prevent the trafficking of artifacts, share information, and help return stolen items. However, it only applies to items removed after 1970.

ii. Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954)

Also adopted under UNESCO, this treaty protects cultural sites and objects during war. It obligates countries to prevent destruction, theft, or damage to cultural treasures when armed conflict occurs. It also encourages the creation of national committees to safeguard cultural property.

iii. UN General Assembly Resolution 3187 (1973)

This resolution officially recognized that cultural property belongs to the cultural heritage of each nation and encouraged the return of stolen or illegally exported cultural objects to their countries of origin. While not legally binding, it expressed global support for restitution and cultural respect.

iv. UN General Assembly Resolution 61/165 (2006)

This resolution reaffirmed the importance of protecting cultural heritage and called on all states to prevent the illicit transfer of cultural property. It encouraged states to support conventions like the 1970 UNESCO Convention and strengthen laws against illegal artifact trade.

v. UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)

This declaration highlights the importance of cultural heritage as part of the identity of communities. It states that cultural expressions and objects are essential for peace and mutual understanding between nations and calls for respect, preservation, and exchange.

6.2 International Treaties and Agreements

i. UNESCO 1970 Convention

This treaty not only discourages illegal trade but also asks countries to cooperate by returning stolen artifacts to their rightful owners. Most UN member states have signed, but some major art market countries were slow to ratify or implement strong enforcement. For example, although many Western countries are parties to this convention, enforcement varies, and documents taken before 1970 are often excluded.

ii. UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995)

Created by the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT), this treaty strengthens the legal framework for recovering stolen cultural objects and resolving disputes across borders. It establishes rules that favor restitution when clear ownership cannot be proven. However, several major countries, including the United States, did not ratify it until recently, and some still have not fully joined.

iii. Hague Convention (1954) and its Protocols

While the main focus is protection during war, this treaty has helped countries agree on how to safeguard cultural heritage and build systems for identifying and returning stolen items during conflict. Many states, including most European and African countries, are parties to this convention, although not all have adopted strict domestic laws for enforcement.

iv. Regional Agreements and Bilateral Deals

In addition to global treaties, many pairs of countries have signed agreements to return specific artifacts. For example, Germany and Nigeria have agreements to repatriate Benin Bronzes, and several museums in France and the Netherlands have made bilateral deals with Cambodia and other nations. These agreements are not part of larger treaties but show how countries can negotiate returns directly.

6.3 Assessment: What Has Worked and What Hasn't

i. Limited Enforcement Power

Most UN resolutions and conventions are not legally binding. UNESCO can encourage cooperation but cannot force countries or museums to return artifacts. This means compliance depends heavily on political will.

ii. Retroactivity Gaps

Many key treaties, especially the 1970 UNESCO Convention do not apply to items taken before they were adopted. Since most looted artifacts were removed long before 1970, this loophole allows museums to argue that they legally acquired items.

iii. Uneven Participation and Implementation

Not all countries have signed or fully enforced the treaties. Some wealthy art market states were slow to ratify the UNIDROIT Convention, and enforcement of laws varies widely. Even in countries that ratified the treaties, domestic laws sometimes contradict international guidelines.

iv. Legal and Logistical Complexities

Clear proof of ownership (provenance) is often difficult to obtain. Museums may argue that they purchased items legally, even if the history of the item was removed from the country of origin is unclear. Tracking provenance requires detailed documentation, which may not be available for many artifacts.

v. Competing interests

Holding countries emphasize preservation and global access to cultural heritage, while countries of origin emphasize justice and preservation of cultural heritage. These positions reflect valid concerns but make negotiations harder without a clear global standard.

7. Bloc Positions and National Perspectives

7.1 Western European Holding States

This bloc includes countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Switzerland. These states generally acknowledge the historical injustices behind many artifacts but are cautious about full restitution. Their priorities include maintaining the major museum collection, legal ownership rights, and ensuring global public access to artifacts. Often claiming they are better equipped to handle and preserve the pieces, or that they are too fragile to be transported. These countries prefer long-term loans instead of permanent returns.

7.2 African States Advocating Restitution

This bloc includes Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Libya. These countries strongly advocate for cultural artifacts taken during colonialism or conflict. Their priorities focus on cultural justice, reclaiming national identity, and correcting historical exploitation. Actively demanding the return of their cultural artifacts. For example, Nigeria has actively pushed for the return of the Benin Bronzes from Great Britain, while Egypt continues to advocate for the return of her artifacts like the Rosetta stone.

7.3 Middle Eastern Claimant States

This Bloc Includes Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. These nations strongly support the return of their cultural artifacts, as many were removed during periods of conflict and instability. Ongoing wars and political instability increase the urgency of restitution, as cultural heritage is at risk of destruction and erasure. These states prioritize rapid repatriation of artifacts to help preserve cultural identity and support national recovery.

7.4 Asia-Pacific Claimant States

This block includes China, India, Korea, Japan, and Australia. Many of these nations support restitution, particularly for items taken during imperial claims or conflict. China and India strongly advocate for the return of stolen artifacts as a part of restoring national dignity. However, countries such as Japan and Australia may take a more moderate stance. Balancing vocality for return with museum co-operations and international partnerships.

8. Key Questions for Debate

1. To what extent can UNESCO balance out fairness and practicality when deciding whether artifacts should be returned?
2. Is it fair for modern governments to be held accountable to actions taken hundreds of years ago?
3. Do international museums belong to the world or should they return artifacts to their country of origin?
4. How should disputes between countries be solved peacefully and fairly?
5. How can we maintain a country or organisation should help pay for the cost of returning artifacts?
6. Should UNESCO focus on short-term solutions such as shared exhibitions or long term solutions, like permanent return or rules.

9. Country List

Australia
Belgium
Canada
China
Egypt
Ethiopia
France
Germany
Greece
India
Iraq
Italy
Japan
Korea
Lebanon
Libya
Mexico
Netherlands
Nigeria
Peru
Senegal
Switzerland
Syria
United kingdom
United States

10. Resources for Further Research

10.1 Official UN Resources

- UNESCO – 1970 Convention on the Illicit Trade of Cultural Property-<https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking> - Explains the main international agreements that were made to prevent illegal import, export, and transfer of cultural artifacts.
- UNESCO – World Heritage Centre - <https://whc.unesco.org/> - Provides background information about cultural heritage and why protecting it is important.

10.2 News and Current Events

- The Straight Times- [Cambodia welcomes back dozens of artefacts looted by UK trafficker](#) | The Straits Times- Because it shows real world example of Cambodian artifacts being returned.
- Town & Country - [A Timeline of Art and Artifacts Repatriated in 2025](#) - It provides information about all the artifacts returned in 2025 and it's month by month.

10.3 Accessible Explainers

- [Source Title] - <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/museums-stolen-treasure-feature> - The article talks about if artifacts should return if they were taken during colonial items, it also talks about both sides of the debate.
- Why museums matter now more than ever | John Blanchard | TEDxFredrikstad- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sepRJJ0qTmY> - In the video we can get an explanation on the importance of museums and things we should do.

10.4 Country Research Resources

- CIA World Factbook (for basic country information): cia.gov/the-world-factbook/
- UN Member States Portal: un.org/en/about-us/member-states
- World Bank Data: <http://data.worldbank.org/>