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BY JORDI BALTÀ PORTOLÉS
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UNESCO Conference Discusses Approaches to Displaced Heritage



On 1 June, UNESCO convened

politicians and experts from across the world to a conference entitled **“Circulation of Cultural Property and Shared Heritage: What New Perspectives”**, as part of its mandate as the UN’s cultural organisation and in keeping with its vocation to serve as an international laboratory of ideas. The conference took place at a time of **growing public debate concerning the circulation and sharing of cultural property preserved in museums, institutions and sites** situated away from the countries or communities that produced them – issues that are both complex and compelling. “The subject encompasses questions of identity, memory, sovereignty, which are not only legal but also diplomatic, political, historical, philosophical and ethical [...] To trace these seized, looted, displaced works is to trace the world’s violent history,” declared **UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay** in her opening message. Ms Azoulay stressed the **need for dialogue and for openness to emerging modalities of cooperation**. **Patrice Talon, President of Benin**, insisted that **cultural objects are essential to the history and identity of nations and peoples, as well as to their development**. “Benin remains convinced of one thing: whatever the historical circumstances of relocation of goods, cooperation

and partnership remain the most effective means for their renaissance and their lasting influence for the benefit of all." A keynote address by **Professor Bénédicte Savoy, art historian at the Technische Universität Berlin and (Germany) and Professor, Collège de France (France)**, contextualized the debate stressing that European museums needed to be recognized for their work in preserving and shedding light on cultural heritage but that this could not be kept apart from **questions concerning the provenance of some of their collections, notably those acquired during the colonial period**. Retracing the evolution of public discourse on sensitive questions concerning these collections, including UNESCO's work in this area, over the past 40 years, she noted a **lack of progress and an urgent need for action**. "Mindsets can evolve. As with all taboo subjects or stories of family secrets [...] we must talk openly for things to change." Ministers from Benin, France, Gabon, Germany, Jordan, Lebanon, Peru, and Senegal presented their political, economic, and cultural visions of the subject. **Senegal's Minister of Culture, Abdou Latif Coulibaly**, underscored that restitution is legitimate, and that "Africa is ready" to house collections in museums on a par with the standards of Western institutions. The **French Minister of Culture, Françoise Nyssen**, said that the emergence of new political will and modalities for restitution, sharing, access and cooperation meant we are "not hostage to the practices of the past." **Monika Grütters**, representing the German government, said **her country was open to discussing restitution and had developed guidelines** to that end. Germany is keen to work with concerned countries and institutions, the Minister said. Ministers of Culture also discussed cooperation in terms of illicit trafficking and the **UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**. **Patricia Balbuena Palacios (Peru)** highlighted the problem of heritage theft and trafficking plaguing her country and much of Latin America. In 2016 **Peru and Switzerland signed an agreement on the international transfer of cultural property and modalities for cooperation**, which led to the repatriation of 66 stolen cultural objects to date. **Ghattas Khoury (Lebanon)** explained the legal case of the Bull's Head of the Temple of Eshmun, whose restitution was made possible in 2018 with assistance from the US authorities. In discussing examples of sharing and restitution, museum directors and experts underscored **the importance of displaced cultural heritage artefacts to their communities of origin, stressing that the moral and ethical obligations involved** were at least as important as the legal ones. Ministers acknowledged that returning cultural property is

about restoring peoples' memory and healing wounds. **George Abungu, Emeritus Director General of Kenya's National Museums**, emphasized issues concerning **sacred cultural objects**. Where a curator examines a carved object from a scientific perspective, community members see it as the lost spirit of a kidnapped relative pining to return home. As an example he explained the spiritual significance of the Vigango sculptures looted from family graves in Kenya, sold to Western museums, some of which were recently restituted to the great joy of their communities. **Te Herekiele Haerehuka Herewini, Director, Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand**, spoke of the **successful resolution of more than 400 requests for the repatriation of Māori and Moriori ancestral remains** from institutions overseas. This, he said, required delicate negotiations and presentations concerning both the history of his country's colonization and of the sacred places concerned, so as to build trust and friendship between negotiating institutions. **Barbara Plankensteiner, Director, Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg, Germany**, an ASEMUS member, said that **lively public debate in Germany, particularly on the colonial past, has led to the revision of legislation and the creation of new frameworks** for collaboration with African partners that put both parties on an equal footing. Some spoke of **extending access to heritage by emphasizing flexibility, cooperation and innovation, including exchanges and loans** between countries and institutions. For example, joint museums like the Louvre Abu Dhabi, foster diplomatic cooperation, bridge building, social integration and the notion of a "new universal museum". **Federico Salas Lotfe, Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Mexico to UNESCO**, and current Chairperson the **UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation**, spoke of the Committee as a forum for dialogue and resolution of cases since its establishment in 1978. Negotiation and goodwill do bring success where laws don't apply, and he mentioned the restitution the Boğazköy Sphinx from the United Kingdom to Turkey, and of the Makondé Mask from Switzerland to the United Republic of Tanzania as examples. Concluding the debate, **Ernesto Ottone R., UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture**, highlighted that the conference provided a **key platform for decision-makers and cultural professionals to renew the debate on shared heritage** and build critical momentum for the future. For **additional information** on the international conference "Circulation of Cultural Property and Shared Heritage: What New

Perspectives", please visit [UNESCO's website](#). Videos documenting the event are available [here](#).

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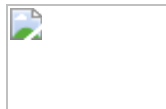
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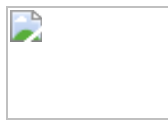
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