

THE ORIGINS OF FALSE DATA AND INACCURATE CLAIMS

We have heard a great deal about “fake news” over the past few years. Essentially it comes from three sources:

- Deliberate dissemination of false information
- Inaccurate reporting of facts, and
- Failure to check information sources

All three have played a part in the misleading picture built up over the years concerning the art market.

The addition of social media to the mix has led to persistent and widespread misinformation. Frequently, inaccurate reporting and the failure to check sources properly go hand in hand. Such misinformation gains added authority and impact when it comes from trusted sources that should know better, as is often the case.

The problem with the term ‘cultural property’

Another major contributing factor is the misuse of the term ‘cultural property’. In general terms it refers to all art, antiques and collectables, as well as items like household goods, as defined by the World Customs Organisation and others. The term ‘cultural property’ is often used in this context when referring to global crime levels. However, when debating ‘cultural property’ in a political context in forums such as UNESCO or national parliaments, it is usual for the term to be taken as referring only to antiquities (See Appendix 1). The result is that statistics that actually refer to all art crime globally, from fraud and theft to forgery and trafficking, are often mistakenly interpreted as referring only to the narrow field of illicit trade in antiquities, thereby creating an entirely false picture. In its 2022-23 Draft Model Provisions on the Prevention and Fight against the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property, UNESCO proposes yet another definition for ‘cultural property’ that does not match that of its own 1970 Convention.