

COMMONLY MADE CLAIMS THAT ARE BOGUS

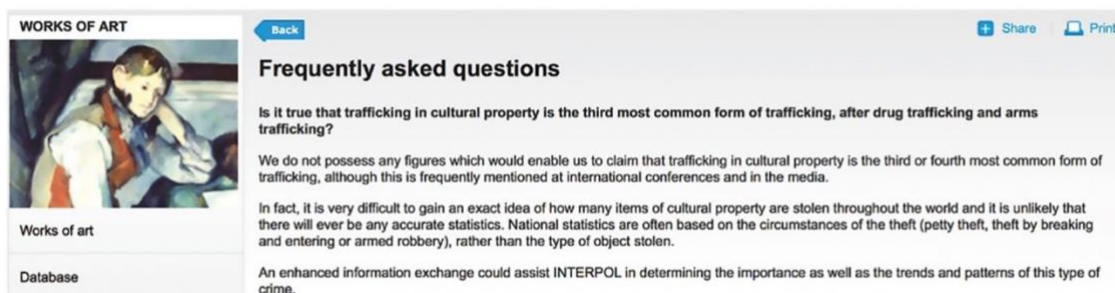
– Trafficking in cultural property is third only to that in drugs and weapons

This has been attributed to Interpol and is a frequently quoted claim in the media that has also been made by numerous other authorities including the European Commission, UNESCO and a 2018 report by Standard Chartered Bank. Where a source for it is given, it can usually be traced back to Interpol. **However, it isn't true.[7]**

A similar claim did appear on the Works of Art Crime page on Interpol's website for several years but was contradicted on the same page by Interpol's FAQs, which stated that Interpol had never had any data to justify this claim nor was ever likely to have. Interpol has now removed the claims from its site, but here they are for reference:



Above: The former Works of Art Crime home page on the Interpol website, where it makes a clear claim about the black market in works of art. This screenshot was taken on February 11, 2019. The statement was removed in March 2019. The World Customs Organisation's Illicit Trade Report 2017 demonstrates clearly that this claim is wrong.



Above: The conflicting claim under the Frequently Asked Questions on the same page of the Interpol website. This screenshot was taken on February 11, 2019. The statement was removed in March 2019.

However, under the *Information for journalists* section on Interpol's updated website, it then noted that it does not collect crime statistics, as can be seen here:

— Does INTERPOL publish crime statistics?

No, we do not collect crime statistics and we do not have any list comparing crime rates in different countries. For individual country data, please contact the national authorities concerned.

This has now changed again, with Interpol confirming that the majority of art-related crime is domestic burglaries:

— Which objects are most frequently stolen?

The majority of art thefts are carried out from private homes but museums and places of worship are also common targets. The type of objects stolen varies from country to country but generally speaking, paintings, sculptures, statues and religious items are very sought after by thieves.

However, no category is spared, including such antique items as artifacts, books, furniture, coins, weapons and gold and silverware.

Either Interpol does have accurate statistics to be able assess the problem or it doesn't. Having long claimed that it doesn't and is never likely to have, what has changed?

– 80-90% of sales of antiquities involve goods with illicit origins.

Although not attributed, one of the sources for this figure is the November 24, 1990 article by Geraldine Norman in *The Independent*, entitled *Great Sale of the Centuries* (See Appendix 2). It has no source other than her opinion. She recently said that it was simply her opinion at the time. Another source for the figure is the UNESCO 2011 report, entitled *The fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural objects. The 1970 Convention: Past and Future*.^[8]

On page two it states: “80% of Etruscan and Roman antiquities on the market today have an illegal provenance, estimates Maurizio Fiorilli, Deputy General Advocate of the Italian State, who chaired the Ministry’s Commission for the restitution of illicitly exported artifacts”.

Obviously, this does not actually refer to all antiquities. It is also possible that this statistic arises from the survey of a single Etruscan cemetery in 1962, although this needs confirming. It is also possibly the basis for the Geraldine Norman claim (see above), although this cannot be confirmed. In any case, there appears to be no basis at all for the claim that 80% of all antiquities that come onto the market are illegal. If that could be confirmed, then they would be able to give an accurate value for illicit trade, something that all parties agree cannot be given.

Another source for the 80% figure is former FBI Special Agent Robert Wittman, Founder of the FBI Art Crime Team, as reported in a 2016 article by John Powers of the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners^[9]. However, Wittman uses it in reference to other aspects of art crime – fraud, forgeries and fakes – which he says together constitute 80% of all art crime. The problem has arisen with Wittman’s use as a source being filtered through other articles and reports, where it has been misinterpreted so that it has ended up being used as a figure referring to antiquities.

– Cultural property trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry

This frequently made claim comes in various forms and applications, with values varying from as low as €2.5 billion to as high as \$45 billion^[10] annually. Sometimes the figures are applied to the entire art market, sometime just to antiquities. The one consistent factor about them is that they are wrong, but that hasn’t stopped them from being used to justify

new regulations, including the European Union's 2019 regulations on import licensing for cultural property.

In 2013, the FBI art crime unit estimated all art crime globally concerning everything from Contemporary art to stamps at around \$4 billion to \$6 billion^[11]. That included crimes such as domestic burglary (the largest single contributor to the figures), vandalism, fraud and so on. This figure has sometimes been expanded to \$6 billion to \$8 billion but is really from the same source, as the John Powers article quoted above shows.

The illicit antiquities trade is worth \$225m to \$3 billion / \$300 million to \$6 billion annually etc

The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) made the following bold claims at the bottom of page 8 of one of the most important reports influencing policy on antiquities crime. Titled *PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE TOOL to assist in the implementation of the International Guidelines for Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Responses with Respect to Trafficking in Cultural Property and Other Related Offences*^[12], it was published in 2016.

- The Museums Association has estimated that profits from the illicit antiquities trade range from \$225 million and \$3 billion per year.²⁸
- The Organized Crime Group of the United Kingdom Metropolitan Police and INTERPOL has calculated that profits from the illicit antiquities trade amounted to between \$300 million and \$6 billion per year.²⁹

²⁷ See Neil Brodie, Jenny Doole and Peter Watson, *Stealing History: The Illicit Trade in Cultural Material* (Cambridge, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2000); and Simon Mackenzie, "Trafficking antiquities" in *International Crime and Justice*, Mangai Natarajan, ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁸ United Kingdom, House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, *Cultural Property: Return and Illicit Trade*, seventh report, vols. 1, 2 and 3 (London, 2000).

²⁹ Ibid.

As can be seen, UNODC gives as its direct source the same Hansard record used by the 2011 UNESCO report that influenced the **European Commission's FACT Sheet**, used as justification for introducing its 2019 import licensing regulations. However, as Hansard itself reveals (*See Appendix 5*), these figures do not relate to antiquities at all, but to the wider art market and luxury goods. One of the resulting issues about this exaggeration of the problem with antiquities is that it has unjustly led to them being used as the excuse for extending much more restrictive AML regulations to the wider art market. This can be seen in the US Senate's focus on antiquities as the next priority for AML under the Bank Secrecy Act, even though the evidence they use to justify this does not relate to antiquities at all^[13]. It also appears that UNODC has not checked the primary source for its claims.

The UNODC acted similarly in 2011 in its report ***Estimating Illicit Financial Flows Resulting from Drug Trafficking and Other Transnational Organized Crimes***. On page 36 it gave a value range of \$3.4 billion to \$6.3 billion as the GFI estimates of the global proceeds of crime for art and cultural property, based on information from Interpol and the International Scientific and Professional Advisory Council of the UN Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Programme. Apart from the broad range of these values and the fact that they are estimates, at least one of the quoted sources, Interpol, has declared that it has never had any figures – nor is ever likely to obtain any (*see above*) – that could allow it to make such a judgment on the level of art crime. Nor do these figures relate to trafficking, but to all art and cultural property related crime.

The UNODC report states that its Interpol and UN-related figures come from the February 2011 Global Financial Integrity (GFI) report, *Transnational crime in the Developing World*, and World Bank, Indicators (for current GDP). **Page 35 of the same GFI report from 2017** puts the estimated value of “the global revenue generated from the illicit trade in cultural property” at “approximately US\$1.2 billion to \$1.6 billion”. It extrapolates this from a global art crime estimate of \$6 billion to \$8 billion, based on the assumption that 80% of such crime is fraud-based. And it, in turn, takes this estimate from two sources: John Powers’ February 2016 article for the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, *Fakes, Forgeries and Dirty Deals: Global Fight against Amorphous Art Fraud*, and Kris Hollington’s July 22, 2014 *Newsweek* article, ***After Drugs and Guns, Art Theft Is the Biggest Criminal Enterprise in the World***, a claim now known to be wrong and without foundation, as the WCO Illicit Trade reports show (See Appendix 6 and 7). Powers’ article is no longer available via the web, but Hollington attributes the \$6 billion to \$8 billion figure to the FBI. As can be seen from the paragraphs above, headlined **80-90% of sales of antiquities involve goods with illicit origins**, it all comes back to the same muddled set of sources, which do not relate either to antiquities or to smuggling.

Now move forward to 2023 and the Financial Action Task Force report, entitled ***Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in the Art and Antiquities Market***, and the \$6.3 billion figure arises once again in paragraph 3 of the Introduction on page 5. The FATF burnishes that figure by stating that it is a UNODC estimate, which its own source (the 2011 report) shows is not true. In reality, it is a figure *quoted* by the UNODC from other uncertain sources.

So, a report by the FATF published in February 2023, aimed at influencing current international policy, quotes a highly dubious (at best) 12-year-old estimate as the key statistic relating to global art crime to make its point.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement also perpetuate the billions falsehood. The claim was included in the boilerplate of all press releases relating to cultural property and antiquities investigations up until May 2020, as this screengrab from one on May 18, 2020 shows:

HSI's International Operations, through its 80 offices in 53 countries, works closely with foreign governments to conduct joint investigations, and is committed to pursuing a strategy to combat transnational organized crime related to the illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts by targeting high-priority organizations and strengthening international law enforcement partnerships.

HSI has recovered and returned approximately 12,500 artifacts to more than 30 countries since 2007, including paintings from France, Germany, Poland and Austria; cultural artifacts from China and Cambodia; dinosaur fossils from Mongolia; and illuminated manuscript left from Italy; a pair of royal Korean seals, ancient Peruvian ceramics, an ancient gold coffin repatriated to Egypt, and most recently, more than 500-year-old copy of Christopher Columbus' letter describing his discoveries in the Americas to the Government of Italy.

Despite increasingly aggressive enforcement efforts to prevent the theft of cultural heritage and other antiquities, the illicit movement of such items across international borders continues to challenge global law enforcement efforts to reduce the trafficking of such property. Trafficking in antiquities is estimated to be a multi-billion-dollar transnational criminal enterprise.

Members of the public who have information about the illicit distribution of cultural property, as well as the illegal trafficking of artwork, are urged to call the toll-free tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or to complete the [online tip form](#).

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This continues today, including in statements made in official presentations and media releases by the HSI. For example, Special Agent in Charge for Homeland Security in New York Ivan J. Arvelo claimed that “antiquities trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar business” during the official reception to return an ancient cosmetic spoon to Israel in Bethlehem on January 5, 2023, a claim which was repeated in the **official release** issued by the U.S Office of Palestinian Affairs.

In April 2023, in an article titled ***Cracking down on illicit art trade to improve security – The OSCE’s critical role***, Cameron Walter, Customs Adviser and Programme Manager of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Heritage Crime Task Force, stated as ‘fact’: “...cultural property is the third most trafficked commodity in the world, after weapons and narcotics in terms of value. While it is hard to put an exact number on it, most estimates are between 2-6 billion US dollars per year with direct linkages to organized crime and terrorist financing, money laundering and corruption networks. That fact should make people pay attention to it, let alone the threat to world history and cultures.”

Standard Chartered Bank produced a two-page report in 2018^[14] on the issue of antiquities crime, attributing claims to the UN, including the bogus claim that trade in illegal antiquities is third only to that in drugs and weapons and is a multi-billion dollar activity. It appears that the source may be the UNODC report reviewed above.



Combating Illegal Antiquities Trade
By Standard Chartered Bank, December 2018

Introduction
The illegal antiquities trade (IAT) is a multibillion-dollar criminal industry, estimated to be the third largest type of black market after illegal drugs and the arms trade, and yet it remains unregulated and under-addressed. The characteristics

Footnotes

[7] See WCO Illicit Trade Report 2021 graphs in the Appendix

[8] UNESCO, *The Fight against the Illicit Traffic of Cultural Objects: The 1970 Convention: Past and Future*, Information Kit, 2011 (see page 2) https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227215_eng

[9] John Powers CFE, *Fakes, forgeries and dirty deals, Global fight against amorphous art fraud*, Featured Article, Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, January/February 2016. As reported by Channing May, *Transnational Crime and the Developing World*, page 35 https://www.gfintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Transnational_Crime-final.pdf

[10] Brooks Tigner, *Europe moves to curb ISIS antiquity trafficking*, New Atlanticist, September 13, 2019: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-moves-to-curb-isis-antiquity->

trafficking/ It is noteworthy that although, in the Editor's note at the end of article, the publishers acknowledge the fact that the figure is wrong, they do not correct the article itself. In fact, the correction in the footnote is, itself, wrong. The global antiquities trade is not worth \$45 billion a year. It is worth an estimated \$300-400 million. The \$45 billion quoted in this context was actually used to estimate the value of the entire legal global art market and was repeated in the wider media.

[11] FBI Art Theft Program video & transcript, 2013: <https://www.fbi.gov/video-repository/newss-fbi-art-theft-program/view>

[12] See https://www.unodc.org/documents/organized-crime/Publications/16-05585_eBook_English_UPDATED.pdf

[13] See <https://www.carper.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/portman-carper-bipartisan-report-reveals-how-russian-oligarchs-use-secretive-art-industry-to-evade-u-s-sanctions/>

[14] See https://av.sc.com/corp-en/others/Combating-Illegal-Antiquities-Trade_FINAL.pdf