



## **REMARKS BY DIRECTOR OF UNICRI, Antonia Marie De Meo**

### **Ceremony for Repatriation of Libyan Cultural Artifacts 31 March 2022, Tripoli, Libya**

Excellencies, National Authorities, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues,

It is an immense pleasure to join you here today, in Tripoli, on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), to celebrate the homecoming of several priceless cultural artifacts. Today marks an important first step in Libya's recovery of assets illegally removed from the country.

The return of illegally removed assets is a highly complex endeavor, and this is certainly true for the cultural antiquities repatriated today. Many entities – national and international – have joined together, with activities spreading over years, to achieve the common goal of returning Libyan assets located abroad to Libya, thereby preserving the cultural heritage of Libya for the Libyan people.

Please allow me to take a few minutes to thank some of the key actors:

- Firstly, appreciation to the United States for its efforts to seize and confiscate these important cultural assets, as part of its wider extensive criminal investigations, led by the Department of Homeland Security, Cultural Property Investigations. They thwart and deter international antiquities trafficking networks that plunder and traffic in priceless cultural heritage. These investigations have resulted in criminal convictions, extraditions, and thousands of seized antiquities. But in addition to its pursuit of criminal accountability, we also thank the United States for its commitment to return antiquities to their rightful homes. The NY DA's Office, has, to date, returned more than 1500 antiquities around the world, including, significantly, these priceless antiquities today to Libya.
- We hope Libya will be hosting similar ceremonies in the near future to welcome the repatriation of other Libyan cultural assets located in France and Spain, among other places.
- Secondly, I would like to commend the Libyan Asset Recovery and Management Office (LARMO) for its pro-active role in coordinating the return of these assets. The LARMO is

the only office of its kind in the Middle East and North African Region, and it can serve as a model for other countries. UNICRI has had the honor to work closely with the LARMO over the past few years, both to offer trainings on international standards and best practices, and to work side-by-side to identify and trace specific assets linked to illicit financial flows out of Libya – ranging from bank accounts to real estate to airplanes to cultural artifacts. We hope that today's success will be repeated many times over, because we know there are many more assets to be recovered by Libya.

- Thirdly, I would like to thank the NGO Bancroft Global Development for its generous support in providing the flight and transportation of these antiquities from the United States to Libya, free of cost to the Libyan Government and the United Nations. This support is proof of the benefits of cooperation between Libyan governmental institutions and civil society actors. I would especially like to mention Mr. Adam Ciralsky, who has served as a key facilitator in the return of today's cultural artifacts.
- Fourthly, appreciation to the European Union Delegation for funding important anti-corruption work in Libya, including the project co-implemented by UNICRI and UNODC through which UNICRI is facilitating the identification, tracing, and recovery of many stolen assets.
- Fifthly, the UNICRI asset recovery team, represented here by Mr. James Shaw, who work tirelessly to promote asset recovery, raise capacity, and share best practices with Governments around the world.
- Finally, let's not forget the many archaeologists, especially the French Archaeological Mission in Libya, who contributed to identifying the origins of these smuggled cultural assets. They hold the keys to unlocking Libya's long and important cultural history.

If you will allow me a small digression. Almost 30 years ago I graduated from law school and published my first professional article, on cultural property protection. My mentor was the US Attorney for our state and she is a leading expert in the field. She instilled in me great appreciation for the role that cultural heritage plays in society and the need for our criminal justice system to prioritize its protection and deter its desecration.

With this background, it will not surprise you that today's ceremony is unequivocally one of the most unique and meaningful of my professional career. It is an honor to be the Head of UNICRI and to share in this repatriation, as well as to represent the United Nations family and our collective commitment to protection and preservation of Libya's cultural property. Cultural rights are human rights, and having access to their priceless antiquities is a right of every people.

Cultural property speaks a universal language. It educates people and depicts their values and beliefs. Long before television and social media, people communicated through art; they told the stories of their civilizations, and many people, including me, believe that these artists, who create such artifacts, have special insights into life as it unfolds. Pieces such as these today have such historic and artistic importance that they reflect the spirit of the Libyan people. They cannot and should not be considered commodities to trade for profit on illicit or licit markets.

To give an example, the *Half Veiled Head of a Woman* and the *Bearded Man* are two different kinds of sculptures of extreme cultural importance. The *Half Veiled Head of a Woman* comes from a funerary statue from the Greco-Libyan period, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. According to the archaeologists, we know of only 10 sculptures of a veiled face, all women, in the entire ancient world, and all of them come from Cyrene, Libya. She represents a goddess or funerary divinity. Her style and delicacy make her a universal masterpiece. The *Bearded Man*, on the other hand, represents a portrait of a real Cyrenaican man from the Roman-Libyan period, 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. We don't know his name, but we can understand his life. These two statues are symbols of the mix of cultures between Libya and its neighbors and the immense significance of the Libyan cultural history to the world. And yet, the statues fell victim to ruthless criminal looters and traffickers, who stole them, chopped off their heads, and sold them for profit, around the year 2000. It is hard to find the words for such inhumane destruction.

Today's ceremony is a reminder that all countries need to prioritize the seizure, confiscation and return of cultural assets to Libya and elsewhere. Extra efforts must be taken to preserve the cultural heritage of countries that have suffered from significant looting, often facilitated by endemic corruption and sophisticated organized criminal networks. And greater attention is due to the deterrent effect of criminal prosecutions against traffickers and smugglers worldwide.

It is well known that war and instability also contribute to the plunder and desecration of cultural heritage. Conversely, one of the dividends of peace is the repatriation of cultural property. Today's repatriation is a victory for Libya, as well as for international law enforcement and the rule of law.

As the UN research and training institute in the field of criminal justice and crime prevention, UNICRI has assisted the authorities in identifying Libyan assets, not just cultural heritage but also traditional financial assets, located in multiple jurisdictions abroad, with an estimated value of 54 billion US dollars.

Given the many high-priority development needs in Libya, we call upon the many countries in which Libyan assets are located to work closely with the LARMO to seize and confiscate stolen assets abroad, and to liquidate and safely return such assets to Libya. UNICRI stands ready to continue lending its specialized expertise to both the LARMO and the Attorney General's Office, as well as foreign jurisdictions, to support these complex asset recovery processes and prosecutions.

Asset returns transparently and safely managed, and used for the benefit of the Libyan people, will help Libya achieve its high priority development needs, such as in healthcare, education, and justice sectors. They will also incentivize other countries to work with Libya to return other illegally removed assets. May today be only the beginning of the return of national assets to Libya.

Thank you and I appreciate the opportunity to celebrate this homecoming of Libyan cultural antiquities.