Cultural Heritage at Risk:

From Shared Challenges to Joint Action

Joint Symposium on Border Security Responses and Cross-Sector Co-operation Against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property

18 & 19 November 2026

Leopold Museum, Vienna, Austria

This high-level, two-day international symposium jointly hosted by the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and ICOM Austria (Austrian National Committee of the International Council of Museums - ICOM), will convene OSCE Delegations, ICOM representatives, senior policymakers, law enforcement authorities, museum & cultural heritage professionals, academics, and international organizations to address the power of cultural diplomacy in an increasingly polarized world where museums and cultural institutions have become a target.

In wars, armed conflicts, areas of crisis, and in the context of terrorist activities worldwide, museums and heritage institutions are attacked to target the history, culture and identity of a community, state or nation. This strategy aims to polarize and divide societies, undermine morale and values, exploit cultural heritage for propaganda purposes, or to use stolen cultural property as a source of income. Illicit trafficking of cultural property therefore remains a highly adaptive and transnational form of organized crime across the OSCE area, increasingly linked to broader illicit economies including terrorism financing, money laundering and sanctions evasion. With ongoing conflict in and immediately surrounding the OSCE area the time to convene participating States, Partners for Cooperation and other organizational partners is urgently needed.

The symposium will build on the operational counter-trafficking experience of the OSCE and its Heritage Crime Task Force, and on ICOM's global institutional experience in cultural heritage protection. It aims to bridge the gap between enforcement and cultural diplomacy by fostering dialogue between traditionally separate communities: law enforcement, customs and border agencies, museums, ministries of culture, and international policy actors. At the same time the symposium will underline the important role of museums in cultural diplomacy dialogue as a strategic tool in both peacebuilding from prevention and pre-conflict deescalation to post-conflict recovery and rebuilding. As trusted public spaces and learning centers, museums foster sustainability, and community building, raising awareness for the importance of protecting cultural heritage while offering new perspectives for the next generations. Cultural diplomacy can build bridges between geopolitical divides, supporting restitution, building trust between states, and reinforcing international legal frameworks. The symposium will also explore innovative approaches, including the use of digital tools, intelligence-sharing platforms, and public-private partnerships.

Over two days, participants will engage in a structured programme combining plenary sessions with select keynote speakers, expert panels, and closed-door operational roundtables. The conference will prioritize actionable outcomes, including the development of joint policy recommendations for OSCE participating States, identification of critical risks affecting heritage institutions in the OSCE Area and other global hotspots, and the strengthening of operational networks across the Mediterranean, Central Asia and the wider OSCE region.