

International Training Programme Conference support grant 2025 Final Report

Name of conference: *International Conference on Recovery of Cultural Heritage 2025*

Date of conference: 15–18 June 2025

Venus: The Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign Office, *Kathmandu, Nepal*



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Introduction

I am currently serving as the Head of the Museum Management and Documentary Heritage Bureau, Department of Cultural Heritage, under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam. In this capacity, I am responsible for coordinating nationwide museum activities, providing professional guidance, and ensuring compliance with relevant policies and regulations. I am also serving as the Secretary of ICOM Vietnam, fostering international cooperation and professional exchange in the museum sector.

One of my core responsibilities involves contributing to the drafting and revision of national policies and legal instruments related to cultural heritage, particularly in the museum domain. I am the Vietnam focal point in UNESCO 1970 convention and focus on overseeing the implementation of Vietnam's commitments under the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Notably, I have been directly involved in the negotiation and successful repatriation of several Vietnamese cultural artifacts from abroad.

Participating in the conference was a valuable opportunity to share experiences, challenges, and new solutions in the repatriation of cultural artifacts. It was also a chance to connect with many international experts in this field.

The Department of Cultural Heritage of Vietnam is a government management agency, and often faces difficulties in covering expenses for attending professional conferences, especially those not planned in the previous year. While we fully understand that such specialized conferences are essential for state management tasks related to museums and for academic exchange in museology, the current national financial mechanism in Vietnam does not yet fully support these professional needs.

Therefore, financial support for attending professional conferences, such as that provided by the International Training Programme (ITP), is extremely helpful for us—especially for developing countries—as it fosters mutual understanding in the museum sector.

Aside from the grant support from ITP, I made personal efforts to cover the remaining expenses.

Link of Conference: <https://nepalheritagerecoverycampaign.org/news/announcement-and-call-for-abstracts/>

Link of my Dept: <https://dsvh.gov.vn/>



I am in front of Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism

Conference experience

The conference was structured around five key thematic sessions, all of which offered highly relevant and insightful discussions. Particularly valuable were the presentations sharing country-specific experiences in compiling inventories of missing artifacts, conducting provenance research, and negotiating the repatriation of cultural property.

I had the opportunity to participate in the panel *“The Role of Cultural Property Agreements.”* This session provided in-depth perspectives on how bilateral and multilateral agreements—such as Memoranda of Understanding—can serve as proactive instruments in preventing illicit trafficking and supporting long-term restitution. Speakers from the United States, Europe, and Nepal presented practical examples that resonate strongly with the current direction of Vietnam’s heritage repatriation efforts.

While the 1970 UNESCO Convention provides the foundational legal framework for cultural property repatriation, its implementation in practice remains complex and often limited by jurisdictional, evidentiary, and diplomatic constraints. I found consensus among many delegates that cultural diplomacy—rather than legal compulsion—offers the most effective path forward in overcoming these obstacles and achieving successful returns.

My presentation, *“Vietnam’s Approach to Artifact Repatriation: Law, Policy, and Cultural Agreements,”* focused on analyzing recent case studies and Vietnam’s evolving legal framework, particularly under the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage. The paper assessed the effectiveness of state-led repatriation efforts and identified several legal and technical gaps, including the need for stronger provenance documentation, negotiation expertise, and international legal cooperation. The presentation concluded with a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing legal tools, investing in professional capacity building, and leveraging cultural diplomacy as a core strategy for heritage recovery.

One of the most insightful presentations was delivered by Ms. Helena Arose, Director of Programmes at The Antiquities Coalition. Her talk underscored the strategic role of bilateral agreements in disrupting illicit trafficking routes and facilitating the legal return of cultural objects. Her emphasis on preventive diplomacy aligns closely with Vietnam's aspiration to establish a Cultural Property Agreement with the United States, and her insights will be instrumental as we move forward in this process.

An unexpected but particularly meaningful exchange occurred during the conference when an Indian heritage specialist approached me to share his findings on a Champa-era sculpture currently held in a Zürich Collection. According to his research, this piece forms a matching pair with a statue currently on display in a Vietnamese museum. He offered valuable suggestions for initiating a dialogue toward the artifact's potential repatriation, highlighting the importance of scholarly cooperation and informal diplomacy in heritage work.

As part of the official program, we also visited the National Museum of Nepal, which houses a remarkable collection of historical and religious artifacts. While the collections themselves were impressive, I observed some challenges in conservation conditions—particularly the lack of environmental control systems and professional-grade exhibition infrastructure. This visit served as a reminder of the shared challenges many countries face in balancing access with preservation.

Media link:

<https://restitutionmatters.org/event/international-conference-on-recovery-of-cultural-heritage-2025/>

<https://diplomatnepal.com/news/international-conference-on-recovery-of-cultural-heritage-2025/>

<https://eventmx.com/events/international-conference-on-recovery-of-cultural-heritage-eventmx>

<https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2025/06/19/restoring-what-time-and-theft-took-away>



Roshan, Helena and Ninh

The British Museum



Kathmandu at night



Outside of conference venue



"Garden of Dreams"

The British Museum



Venues for conference @ Internet



Repatriated artifacts are on display at the National Museum of Nepal.

Networking

I met:

- *Helena Arose*, Director of Programmes at The Antiquities Coalition, provided me with valuable guidance on the development of a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Vietnam and the United States regarding the repatriation of cultural property.
- *Vijay Kumar*, Co-founder of the India Pride Project, shared with me several pieces of information regarding Vietnamese artifacts that are currently missing or held abroad.
- In addition, I had private meetings with a number of experts from Denmark, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. We exchanged personal contacts and discussed potential future collaborations.

ITP reunions?

I met Roshan Mishra, an ITP 2018 alumnus and ITP Senior Fellow 2022, and we had in-depth discussions on the repatriation of cultural artifacts—particularly the return of objects to their original sites to support the spiritual and ritual practices of local communities. This approach reflects Nepal's strong emphasis on reintegrating heritage into living traditions. In contrast, some heritage sites in

Vietnam have been destroyed during wartime, which presents additional challenges in restoring the original context of repatriated artifacts.



Me and Roshan in front of Conference backdrop

The future

Attending the *International Conference on the Recovery of Cultural Heritage 2025* has left a meaningful legacy on both a personal and professional level. It deepened my understanding of international legal instruments, negotiation strategies, and cultural diplomacy approaches in the context of artifact repatriation. The exposure to successful practices from other countries has provided me with a comparative framework to reflect on Vietnam's current policies and challenges.

Upon returning to my institution—the Department of Cultural Heritage, Vietnam—I plan to propose the following changes and initiatives:

- Developing clearer guidelines for provenance research and inventory management of cultural artifacts believed to be held abroad.
- Advocating for stronger inter-agency coordination between heritage, customs, and foreign affairs departments in preparation for potential bilateral agreements.
- Establishing an informal working group to explore the feasibility of a Cultural Property Agreement with the United States, following advice received during the conference.

The conference also inspired new ideas related to community-based restitution, particularly the reintegration of returned objects into their original religious and cultural contexts—something we hope to consider more seriously in future repatriation cases.

I fully intend to stay in touch with fellow delegates, especially those from Nepal, India, the United States, and Europe. Our discussions have laid the groundwork for future knowledge exchange and possibly joint research or training workshops.

In terms of broader impact, I believe this conference will have a lasting legacy through:

- A potential publication or proceedings volume, summarizing key discussions and papers.
- Strengthened regional and global partnerships among heritage professionals.
- The momentum for future convenings, perhaps even in Southeast Asia, to further regional cooperation on cultural heritage recovery.

Overall, the insights gained and connections made will directly inform Vietnam’s strategic approach to cultural property repatriation in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the International Training Programme (ITP) and the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust for their generous support, which made my attendance at the *International Conference on the Recovery of Cultural Heritage 2025* in Kathmandu possible.

I also wish to thank the conference organizers, particularly the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign (NHRC), for their excellent coordination and hospitality throughout the event.

Finally, I am especially grateful to the Department of Cultural Heritage, Vietnam, for encouraging and facilitating my participation. This opportunity to engage in international dialogue on artifact repatriation has greatly enriched my professional perspective and fostered new avenues for cooperation.