

# Searching for lost pieces of art in Poland

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## Résumé

En 1987, le ministre polonais des Arts et de la Culture a créé une unité spéciale, le Centre de Protection et de Conservation des Monuments, très actif dès sa création et qui utilisa d'emblée une base de données informatique. Aujourd'hui, ce Centre n'est pas seulement lié à la Police polonaise, mais il a des contacts étroits avec les médias et également avec Interpol. Membre actif au sein d'ICMS, ce Centre travaille à l'élaboration d'une structure permettant d'utiliser Internet dans la restitution des objets d'art volés. En raison de l'absence de protection efficace de l'accès au réseau Internet, Interpol est actuellement réticent à ouvrir ses fichiers aux autres groupes de sécurité, tels que le Centre de Protection et de Conservation des Monuments ou ICMS. Il le fera lorsqu'il existera une protection efficace contre les pirates informatiques et leurs dangereuses plaisanteries.

The creation of a systematic and comprehensive system of searching for artworks that were lost as a result of crime began in 1987. Until then a traditional system had predominated in Poland, one that was based exclusively on police structures. The latter, after receiving information from a sufferer about theft or robbery, undertook investigation aiming at recovering the lost items. In the case of the most important thefts, the information about losses was widely propagated by the press, radio and TV. This system endured until 1987. It resulted in a limitation of the search sphere, and also the exclusion or limitation of a considerable circle of persons – collectors, antiques dealers and experts in museum management. The police issued photo-communicés with the artworks that were being searched for, but their usefulness was very limited on account of the poor publishing quality. Some pictures though original were indistinct, and their xerographs could not be adapted for identification. In Poland, unlike some western countries such as France, Italy or Great

Britain, the specialist departments for combating crime against cultural property were not set up within police structures. This fact considerably hindered carrying out effective searches. The situation started to change after 1987, when the Minister of Art and Culture set up a special unit – the Centre for Protection of Museum Objects (which is now called the Centre for Protection and Conservation of Monuments, after changes in 1991 and 1994). Its fundamental task was to assist museums (later also other cultural institutions) in their protection against crime and fire. One of the most fundamental tasks of the Centre was establishing evidence of lost and stolen artworks. Such a database came into being in 1988. Data on losses were collected from all of Poland's museums, comprising, at the beginning, data from the year 1970 and later, data from the years 1945-1969. From the very beginning we aimed at running a catalogue of the database in computer form. From 1989-1990 we were one of the very few cultural institutions that worked on the data in this way. None of the 600 museums had any inventory of their collections run this way. The first publication (book) with evidence on losses from Poland's museums was prepared as far back as 1988. In 1991 a supplement to the catalogue was prepared. In the years that followed we relinquished publishing information in this format on account of the considerable costs. The first copies of the catalogue were sent to Interpol Headquarters in Lyon. Poland was not yet an Interpol member in 1988, which is why the Centre had direct exchange of information with the Headquarters in Lyon at the time. It ought to be emphasised that a non-police unit, as our institution had always been, had wide open access to Interpol. The information about artworks that were being searched for had been accepted directly from us, until Poland's police joined the structures of Interpol. Interpol activity in the sphere of protection is still characterised by wide access, and the will to use other units' experiments, not necessarily police ones. This is proved by constant invitations to the specialist sessions being organised by Interpol and which focus on matters of theft, illegal exportation and the trade of artworks throughout the world. In 1992 an agreement with the police was signed. Thanks to its terms the mutual exchange of infor-

mation on stolen artworks was begun. The Centre for Protection of Museum Objects rendered its computer database accessible in full, and also helped in working out aid programmes. The mutual exchange of information increased the efficiency of searches conducted on lost artworks. Independently of co-operation with the police, the Centre tried to create a non-police system of information about searches on the lost artworks. In the beginning, we ensured we had constant, quick access to radio and TV, so in the case of any serious theft, the information about it and about lost artworks could immediately appear. We co-operated with the editorial staff of the antiques magazine *Art and Business* and the scientific magazine *Spotkanie z Zabytkami* (Meeting with Monuments), in which we included information about searches. Positive results of our activities soon became apparent. We started to receive signals about artworks that had been recovered and identified on the basis of our publications. In 1997, our Centre started to publish its own magazine *Cenne, bezcenne, utracone* (Valuable, Priceless, Lost), of which one of the main features is the catalogue of losses. Apart from search activities in the country, we tie up with international contacts – *The Art Less Register* and also the *International Foundation for Art Research*. Starting our work at ICOM's International Committee for Museum Security was of very great importance to us while we were organising protection for the exchange of information on museum protection. Co-operation with colleagues from abroad, achieved through the mediation of ICMS plays a very important role in drawing up the programme for museum protection and provision. New resources appear every year, resources that may be used in prevention activities for museum protection or in searches for lost artworks. The Internet is becoming just such a tool. Penetration of computer networks under different passwords related to artwork thefts brings very interesting evidence concerning the sources of the information about the thefts – the newest publications. The use of the Internet for international searches was touched on in the Interpol session in Autumn 1996.

At the moment, Interpol does not see any possibility of the extended

use of the Internet network for artwork searches on account of poor protection of evidence. I am of the opinion that the most important problem is not the fear of having access to the evidence, for it ought to be general, but the possibility of changing the evidence that has already been entered. It is easy to imagine the mess that would arise if the information about artworks that were being searched for were changed. Hackers' jokes or deliberate action could lead to information paralysis. If the problem of the safety of evidence on the Internet were to be solved completely, I think that full use of the Internet would be possible. The fact that at the moment police structures are not interested in using the Internet for their purposes, does not mean that other institutions should not use it either. It seems advisable to create an Internet page that includes evidence about the most valuable pieces of stolen art, which are likely to appear on international markets in every country's cultural institutions. Such information will soon appear on our Centre's Internet page. Forms of information may be very different, but the Internet with its open access dominates over other solutions. I think that ICMS will have a great role to play in creating such an activity. I have not been able to mention all the issues related to artwork searches in such a short paper. There are many problems that occur only in Poland and are of little importance in the context of international co-operation. Poland's experiences focus on the assumption that the creation of a non-police information system on artwork searches definitely contributes to improved efficiency in recovering lost goods.