THE GREAT GIVEBACK

ANALYSIS OF THE MUSEUM OF LOOTED ANTIQUITIES DATASET

MOLA
MUSEUM OF LOOTED ANTIQUITIES

FRONT MATTER

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FOREWORD: DEBORAH LEHR

For decades, the illicit trade in antiquities was often treated as a niche cultural issue—regrettable, but largely victimless. In reality, it has been anything but. Over the past century, cultural objects have been looted during war, occupation, genocide, and political upheaval; in some cases, their trafficking has generated revenue for criminal, armed, and extremist groups. Looting deprives communities of their history and identity, while cultural racketeering can threaten the legitimate art market, national economies, global security, and the rule of law.

Yet the movement and return of cultural objects cannot be understood through a criminal lens alone. Antiquities may also be returned because they were removed under colonial rule, taken from Indigenous Peoples, retained beyond the terms of a loan, subjected to competing ownership claims, or voluntarily relinquished as legal and ethical standards evolve. These cases share an outcome—return—but not a single history, legal basis, or policy solution. Understanding those distinctions is essential to developing effective responses.

For many years, public policy did not reflect either the seriousness or the complexity of these issues. Antiquities trafficking was viewed largely through a cultural lens and addressed primarily by ministries of culture and heritage authorities. These institutions have played an essential role in protecting archaeological sites and collections, but they often overlooked the wider implications of the illicit trade. At the same time, repatriations were often treated as isolated disputes rather than as belonging to a broader field of legal, diplomatic, and institutional practice.

My experience in government and the private sector made this disconnect increasingly clear. During my time at the National Security Council and as a Deputy Assistant U.S. Trade Representative, and later while advising global firms and institutions, I saw how policymakers approach complex international challenges. Issues that command sustained attention—from financial crime to terrorism—are those understood to carry consequences for security, markets, and governance. Antiquities trafficking rarely appeared in those conversations, despite evidence connecting it to many of the same criminal and geopolitical dynamics.

Recognizing this gap, I founded the Antiquities Coalition in 2014 to change the narrative around cultural racketeering and bring the issue to the attention of the policymakers best positioned to address it. From the outset, our goal has been to situate the illicit trade in antiquities within the broader frameworks of transnational crime, economic integrity, and international security. Today, the Coalition works not only with cultural authorities but also with ministries of foreign affairs, defense, and finance, as well as the intelligence, law-enforcement, and diplomatic communities. Protecting cultural heritage requires preservation, but it also requires coordinated action against the criminal networks and financial structures that enable looting and trafficking.

One of the greatest obstacles to effective action has been the lack of reliable data. When policymakers confront a complex challenge, they ask basic questions: What is happening? At what scale? Why? Which

interventions have produced results? For the illicit antiquities trade, those questions are difficult to answer because transactions occur within opaque markets and across fragmented jurisdictions. Repatriations generate a more visible record, but that record is itself incomplete and dispersed. Prominent returns make headlines; many others occur with little public notice. Even when a return is announced, essential information about the objects, parties, circumstances, and mechanisms involved may be unavailable or inconsistent.

This report represents an important step toward addressing that evidence gap. Drawing on nearly 1,400 cases involving more than one million cultural objects documented by the Museum of Looted Antiquities (MOLA), it examines repatriation as a global practice. It asks what these cases, considered systematically, can tell us about the movement and return of cultural objects. Where returns arise from documented theft or trafficking, the data can illuminate criminal pathways, enforcement activity, and vulnerabilities within the legitimate market. More broadly, the dataset can reveal when and where returns occur, who participates in them, why objects are returned, and which legal, diplomatic, and institutional mechanisms are used.

Encouragingly, international recognition of these issues has grown. The United Nations General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the G7 and G20, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and NATO have all addressed the links between cultural-property crime, organized crime, and the financing of armed groups. At the same time, governments, Indigenous Peoples, museums, and communities of origin are devoting greater attention to restitution and return. These developments are related, but they are not identical. Both require evidence precise enough to distinguish among different histories, harms, and policy needs.

Recognition alone is not enough. Meaningful progress will require sustained political will, stronger international coordination, responsible practices within the art market and cultural institutions, clearer definitions, greater transparency, and continued investment in research and data collection.

It is my hope that this report will help advance that work. Its purpose is not simply to count repatriations, but to understand them: to move beyond individual headlines, identify broader patterns, and give policymakers, researchers, institutions, and communities a stronger basis for action. Better evidence can help us disrupt cultural racketeering where it occurs, improve the stewardship and exchange of cultural objects, and facilitate responsible returns. In doing so, we can better protect the cultural heritage that connects communities to their past and all of us to one another.

FOREWORD: JASON FELCH

When I began investigating antiquities trafficking 20 years ago, as an investigative reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, I ran across a recurring challenge: despite wave after wave of revelation and repatriation, no expert in the field could answer a few basic questions.

How many antiquities have been returned in recent years? By whom and to whom? What factors most often led to their return? What was the size and scope of the illicit antiquities trade that was behind many of these repatriations? Who are the key figures that control this global black market, and why have they so often escaped justice?

For journalists, these questions are the essential elements of what they call the "nut graph": the contextual paragraph, usually falling around the third or fourth paragraph of every news story, that pulls back from the news of the day and explains to the reader why a story matters. They are also, as it happens, the same questions that would inform good policy decisions about how to stop further antiquities trafficking.

That hole in the story persisted over years of investigating antiquities trafficking for newspapers; in a 2011 book I co-wrote called *Chasing Aphrodite*; on a blog of the same name that I wrote for a decade; and in countless lectures, interviews and documentary films since I left journalism in 2014 and started running a consulting firm that specializes in open-source investigations. Answering those basic questions became something of an obsession—the missing context for making sense of a black market whose import seemed to grow by the day.

Early on, I began keeping a spreadsheet, collecting documents and logging basic facts for every antiquity that had been returned, adding new ones as they made news. Over the years, that list grew from hundreds to thousands of objects, and I felt the need to share the data—and the labor of collecting and tallying it—with a group of like-minded scholars, reporters, investigators, citizen sleuths, and policy experts who shared my obsession.

That humble spreadsheet was the seed of what in 2024 became the Museum of Looted Antiquities. Today, MOLA's dataset of repatriated objects contains information on more than one million antiquities and ethnographic objects from around the world that have been returned to their country of origin—and the trafficking networks behind many of them. It is a foundation from which MOLA can begin to answer those basic questions that have haunted me all these years.

The following report is an analysis of MOLA's first year of collecting that data, building a spreadsheet into a detailed record of returned objects and their pathways through the market. The work, conducted by MOLA's team of volunteers around the world, is far from done—MOLA is still finding historical returns and adding new cases every day as they make news. But the MOLA dataset, to my knowledge, is already the most comprehensive accounting of a phenomenon that is increasingly important, yet still poorly understood.

The need of those grounding figures—and well-documented evidence to support them—has never been more apparent. Despite urgent international calls for better laws, policy, and practices to protect cultural heritage, we are still limited in our ability to describe the scope of the problem. MOLA hopes this report, published with the generous support of our colleagues at the Antiquities Coalition, is a first step in closing that data gap.

Figure 1. MOLA, Global repatriations, 2026. This map shows the repatriations of over one million antiquities recorded in the MOLA dataset, with orange representing sending countries and blue as receiving countries.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Antiquities are a tangible form of cultural heritage that connect individuals, communities, and even countries to their histories, traditions, and identities. As they cross borders or change hands—whether lawfully or unlawfully—they can raise complex questions about who should possess them and where they belong. One possible outcome of these questions is repatriation: the return of an antiquity to its country or nation of origin. Such returns have become increasingly visible, yet remain poorly understood. We lack systematic data on what is returned, in what quantities, for what reasons, from where and to whom, and through which mechanisms. Without that evidence, governments and other stakeholders have little basis for identifying the policies and practices that best protect cultural heritage, support responsible cultural exchange, and—when appropriate—facilitate repatriation.

This data gap has practical consequences. At the national and international levels, the legal, policy, and enforcement responses are often shaped by isolated cases, prominent headlines, or moments of crisis rather than evidence about broader patterns and outcomes. As a result, decision-makers struggle to assess the scale and trajectory of repatriation, identify recurring challenges and opportunities, compare approaches across jurisdictions, or direct limited resources where they can have the greatest impact.

Building on important work by governments, intergovernmental organizations, art market leaders, and the scholarly community, *The Great Giveback* helps fill this gap. It analyzes data compiled by the Museum of Looted Antiquities, a global, online repository that documents returns of antiquities to their States, institutions, or communities of origin. Covering more than one million cultural objects repatriated through nearly 1,400 individual cases since 1950, MOLA is the most complete resource of its kind to date.

The value of the dataset goes beyond its scale. MOLA's case studies also capture structured information about objects, pathways, actors, jurisdictions, and the mechanisms of and reasons for return. This uniquely deep and expansive record offers actionable insights into recurring patterns, vulnerabilities within the art market and cultural institutions, and possible points of intervention.

Those insights, in turn, will allow decision-makers to move beyond anecdotes by helping governments and other stakeholders develop better-informed law and policy, allocate limited resources more effectively, identify opportunities for international cooperation, assess institutional and market risks, and build on approaches that have produced results elsewhere.

This report is intended to support the actors responsible for making those decisions—whether States, intergovernmental organizations, legislators and other policymakers, law enforcement, museums, collectors, the art market, the wider private sector, civil society, or communities of origin.

Ultimately, the purpose of this report is not simply to document the scope of repatriations, but to understand them. By bringing together nearly 1,400 cases spanning more than seven decades, it seeks to provide a clearer picture of what is happening, why it is happening, and what those patterns can teach us about protecting and recovering cultural property in the future.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

The movement and return of antiquities matter far beyond any one object or case. Repatriation has implications not just for cultural heritage, but governance, diplomacy, markets, trade, and human rights. The findings below show how reliable repatriation data can inform policy and practice across these fields.

1. BILLION-DOLLAR IMPACT

Beyond their cultural, historical, religious, and informational value, the returned antiquities in the MOLA dataset also represent substantial financial assets. Reported or estimated valuations are available for 58% of the objects and total $2.06 billion in 2024 U.S. dollars, nearly $790 million of which comes from a single case, the 2012 return of the Black Swan Hoard to Spain. Applying the average value of documented objects to those without valuation data, MOLA extrapolates a total market value of $3.5 billion for repatriated objects documented in this report. Taken together, these valuations underscore the significant financial implications of repatriation for countries and nations of origin, dealers, individual collectors, museums, and other art market participants.

2. A GROWING TREND

Returns have increased sharply over the past two decades, with recent years accounting for a growing share of cases, objects, and associated value. In 2024—the largest year on record by number of cases—more than 140 cases involving tens of thousands of objects were documented worldwide. In parallel, the value associated with returns has also risen sharply, exceeding $250 million in 2023. Across these indicators, the economic and institutional stakes are clearly growing, not receding.

3. REPATRIATION IS A GLOBAL ISSUE

MOLA has documented repatriations to over 100 countries and dozens of sovereign Indigenous nations. These returns arise from varied circumstances—including contemporary trafficking investigations, colonial-era removals, and claims involving Indigenous cultural heritage—showing that repatriation is not confined to a single region, historical context, or pathway.

4. SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT IS ASSOCIATED WITH MORE RETURNS

In the MOLA dataset, countries that have made repatriation a sustained priority—including Egypt, Iraq, Italy, Peru, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye—are among those receiving the largest numbers of returned objects. Each has used a combination of public and legal campaigns, diplomatic engagement, and participation in international conventions and bilateral agreements to secure returns. Although the data do not establish the effect of any single measure, the pattern suggests that sustained attention and coordinated action can strengthen a country's ability to secure returns.

5. SPECIALIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Specialized cultural-property units are responsible for some of the most substantial recoveries documented by MOLA. As of September 2026, the Manhattan District Attorney's Antiquities Trafficking Unit (Manhattan DA ATU)—working with U.S. Homeland Security Investigations and international partners—has recovered approximately 6,400 objects valued at $495 million and returned approximately 6,250 of them to 40 countries.[1] In another example, during 2025 alone, Italy's Comando Carabinieri per la Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale (Carabinieri TPC) recovered 75,009 pieces of cultural property valued at €73 million ($82 million) and returned 146 items to 14 countries.[2] These results illustrate how sustained expertise, resources, and international cooperation can support recovery and return when criminal violations are identified and pursued.

6. U.S. MUSEUMS ACCOUNT FOR SIGNIFICANT RETURNS

Returns from cultural institutions in the United States figure prominently in the data, accounting for about 10% of all returns recorded. MOLA documented 101,472 cultural objects returned by 81 U.S. museums as of September 2025. Valuation data are available for 40,391 of those objects returned by 29 of those institutions and total over $312 million, suggesting an estimated value of $785 million for all documented U.S. museum returns. These returns occurred under varied circumstances, including law enforcement seizures, legal claims, and voluntary action.

[1] For Manhattan DA ATU statistics, see: Manhattan District Attorney's Office, "D.A. Bragg Announces Return Of 36 Antiquities To The People Of Syria," press release, September 23, 2026, https://manhattanda.org/d-a-bragg-announces-return-of-36-antiquities-to-the-people-of-syria/.

[2] For Carabinieri TPC statistics, see: "Pubblicazioni," Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, accessed September 1, 2026, https://tpcweb.carabinieri.it/SitoPubblico/home/contenuti/pubblicazioni.

INTRODUCTION

Hardly a week passes without headlines about another antiquity or collection being returned to its country, nation, or community of origin. Some returns follow seizures or legal claims; others result from diplomatic negotiations, institutional initiatives, or changing ethical standards. But amid those passing headlines, surprisingly little is known about the true scope and scale of repatriation, despite growing interest from governments, international organizations, scholars, journalists, cultural institutions, communities of origin, and the general public.

These cases unfold against an international legal framework built over more than seven decades. The First Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1970 UNESCO Convention, and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention each address the restitution or return of cultural property under different circumstances. Yet authorities around the world still struggle to cite systematic, comparable data on what has been returned, to whom, why, and through which mechanisms.

The repatriation cases themselves contain much of the information needed to answer these questions. But despite their promise as a source of data, there has been little effort to catalog them systematically. There is no global register of repatriated objects, and many repatriations do not even generate news. In the absence of reliable data, scholars have noted a profusion of false, misleading, or ungrounded claims about the scope of the issue.[3]

The challenge, then, is collecting information from these myriad repatriation cases that can be turned into data that can be searched and analyzed at scale. Doing so is not easy. In particular, data about the pathway of repatriated objects are difficult to find: When museums return antiquities, they have often deleted the public data on these objects as soon as they're removed from display.[4] Law enforcement is selective about releasing the facts uncovered during investigations.[5] And when countries announce the recovery of an object, they rarely detail—or even examine—the path it took out of the country years earlier.

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[3] Donna Yates and Neil Brodie, "The Illicit Trade in Antiquities Is Not the World's Third-Largest Illicit Trade: A Critical Evaluation of a Factoid," *Antiquity* 97, no. 394 (2023): 991–1003, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.90.

[4] Lauren Henderson, "The Duryodhana Dilemma: United States v. A 10th Century Cambodian Sandstone Sculpture and a Proposed Code of Ethics-Based Response to Repatriation Requests for Auction Houses," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 163, no. 1 (2014): 249-81; U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, "Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Return Of 10Th Century Sandstone Sculpture To The Kingdom Of Cambodia," press release, May 7, 2014, https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-return-10th-century-sandstone-sculpture-kingdom; and Zachary Small, "Metropolitan Museum of Art's Repatriation Problem Is Getting Bigger," *ARTnews*, January 20, 2023, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/metropolitan-museum-of-arts-repatriation-news-1234654313/.

[5] See an example of an ongoing case: U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, "U.S. Attorney Announces $12 Million Settlement Of Civil Forfeiture Action Against Estate Of Antiquities Trafficker Douglas Latchford," press release, June 22, 2023, https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-attorney-announces-12-million-settlement-civil-forfeiture-action-against-estate; and for an example of a repatriation announcement, see: Sopheng Cheang, "Cambodia's prime minister welcomes artifacts returned by New York's Met and other collections," *The Associated Press*, August 22, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/cambodian-artifacts-museums-repatriation-hun-manet-9e3fc4f8a7d55cc63ddd53b87eabaea8.

The **Museum of Looted Antiquities** was founded in 2024 to address this global evidence gap.[6] The project uses volunteer contributors and peer reviewers to collect data on global antiquities repatriation cases since 1950. For each case, MOLA extracts data on 57 different fields, ranging from information about the objects themselves—size, country of origin, culture, market value—to the network of actors who played a role in their removal, transportation, sale, and return.

The MOLA dataset is the largest, and to our knowledge, the only global record of antiquities repatriations.[7] As of September 2025, when this analysis was conducted, the MOLA dataset contained information on 1,391 repatriation cases involving 1,057,991 objects, with a documented value of more than $2.06 billion and an estimated total value of more than $3.5 billion.[8]

This dataset is necessarily incomplete and limited in several ways. There are likely many more repatriation cases that have yet to be identified, and for many existing cases, only partial information is available. In addition, there are limits to the collection method—which skews toward cases covered in English-language sources—and the evaluation of the market values ascribed to repatriated objects from public sources. Therefore, this report represents a starting point for understanding the scale and scope of repatriations, not the final word.

[6] The lead authors of this report, Jason Felch and Katherine Davidson, guided the data collection and editorial work of MOLA, a project of the U.S. nonprofit research consortium Achilles Research Group. See: Achilles Research Group, accessed September 1, 2026, https://achillesresearch.org/.

[7] The largest national database, Leonardo, is maintained by the specialized unit of the Italian Carabinieri, the Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Comando Carabinieri per la Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale). It contains data on 1.3 million stolen artifacts and 7 million total objects, including fakes and forgeries. See: Salvatore Rapicavoli, "Innovation and technology with artificial intelligence to explore the web in search of stolen works of art – the S.W.O.A.D.S. project," PowerPoint presentation, The Nicosia Convention, Riga, Latvia, 15 June 2023, https://rm.coe.int/international-conference-the-nicosia-convention-a-criminal-justice-res/1680abb733.

[8] As of September 2025. See Methodology for more detail on data collection.

METHODOLOGY

While the full MOLA dataset goes beyond the scope of this report, this section introduces the methodology used to define, gather, review, and analyze the data.

THE MOLA DATASET

MOLA was launched publicly in June 2024. As of September 2025 (when this analysis was conducted), the MOLA dataset contained information on 1,391 cases involving 1,057,991 repatriated objects, with a documented value of more than $2.06 billion and an estimated total value of more than $3.5 billion.

MOLA publishes case studies on individual repatriation cases and collects data on a far broader array of cases that it uses for analysis. For each repatriation case, MOLA collects data on up to 57 discrete fields, ranging from object type, culture, and date of repatriation to the pathway the object took through the market, the key actors, market valuations, and reasons for return. Because these data often include the names of alleged smugglers and traffickers who have not been convicted, some of the data collected by MOLA are not released publicly.[9]

MOLA relies almost exclusively on publicly available, open-source information gathered from court records, government documents, museum archives, media articles, academic research, and other sources in a variety of languages. MOLA uses Freedom of Information laws and data requests to obtain previously unreleased records. Where MOLA has access to non-public records, it cites them as sources but limits access to them, storing the records in a searchable, digital trafficking library with controlled access.

The dataset, which spans 1950 to today, aims to be comprehensive but is necessarily incomplete. Due to the increasing frequency of repatriations and the work required to identify historical cases globally while keeping up with new cases, the data are—and likely always will be—continuously evolving. As such, the trends they capture reflect only the cases MOLA has documented and carry the biases of their primary collectors. For example, MOLA data have more thorough coverage of repatriations from North American and European collections that are often the result of contemporary antiquities trafficking networks. MOLA is actively building partnerships with international groups that, over time, will build its depth in areas of limited coverage, including repatriations documented in languages other than English, colonial repatriations, and returns to Indigenous communities.

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

In building the dataset, MOLA made certain decisions and judgment calls about the types of cases from which MOLA collects data, and how those data are categorized. Here, MOLA aims to explain those decisions and their impact on the analysis.

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[9] See the MOLA data structure here: "Contribute," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/contribute.

Antiquities: MOLA defines "antiquities" broadly to include cultural objects, artifacts and ethnographic material that have significant archaeological and heritage value. This includes religious objects, human remains, and more contemporary cultural artifacts that may not conventionally be recorded as an "antiquity," which is usually defined as being at least 250 years old.[10] MOLA also includes ancient coins within its definition of antiquities, though some suggest numismatics should be considered under its own category as "objects of early mass production."[11] MOLA generally does not include works of fine art (such as paintings and sculpture produced as artworks and not affiliated with a specific cultural group) except in some rare edge cases, such as ancient religious paintings.[12]

Resolved case: MOLA exclusively records resolved cases, which it defines as repatriation claims settled through legal challenges, seizures by law enforcement, returned to a country of origin voluntarily, or through a negotiated settlement. In all these cases, the dispute over the object has been resolved and, in the process, generated some public record, such as court records, agreements, press releases, media reports, social media postings, or government records.

Repatriation: For the purposes of inclusion, MOLA considers an object to be "repatriated" at the time of seizure or when title reverts to the original owner. In some cases, it is only years later that an object physically returns to its country or nation of origin, while in a few cases they are allowed to remain on display after a claim is resolved. Objects that are the subject of ongoing claims are not included.

1950 start date: MOLA has set 1950 as the start date for data collection for a few reasons. While repatriations were relatively rare before the 1990s, starting in 1950 allows MOLA to document how institutional actions and social norms have evolved with changing international accords, starting with the 1954 Hague Convention and spanning the 1970 UNESCO Convention, alongside subsequent national and international efforts to curb the illicit trade.[13] The year 1950 is also used in the cultural heritage field to determine the "present" era of archaeological science, making it a conventional starting point.

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[10] Across the field of cultural heritage, the definitions of what counts as an "antiquity" in this space are rather varied, at times including art, artifacts, coins, human remains, "cultural goods" or cultural objects, belongings, and objects of cultural patrimony. For the 250-year threshold for archaeological material, see Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act, 19 U.S.C. § 2601(2)(C)(i)(II).

[11] Kate Fitz Gibbon, "A Closer Look at the Portable Antiquities Scheme," *Cultural Property News*, June 24, 2024, https://culturalpropertynews.org/a-closer-look-at-the-portable-antiquities-scheme/.

[12] "Aydin Dikmen Collection," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/2185.

[13] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention, No. 3511, September 4, 1956, https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict-regulations-execution-convention; and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, No. 11806, November 14, 1970, https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural.

DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

The current MOLA dataset has been collected through a combination of manual and machine-assisted search methods and manual data entry, which is then peer-reviewed by members of the MOLA editorial team.[14]

MOLA's initial data on repatriations and a digital archive of supporting documents were collected by MOLA founder Jason Felch over two decades of covering the illicit antiquities trade as a journalist and, since 2014, as an independent researcher. From MOLA's launch in June 2024, the dataset has been supplemented considerably by a volunteer team of dozens of global contributors and peer reviewers. The dataset is hosted and managed on an instance of the open-source content management system Omeka.[15]

To identify additional cases, project staff performed a machine-assisted search for global repatriation events missing from MOLA's initial dataset, targeting a variety of online resources to identify historical cases across the globe. Digitally mediated search methods allowed MOLA to effectively identify hundreds of cases that had previously been overlooked.[16]

With the data obtained from a web crawler, social media archives, and a literature review, MOLA manually verified if the case was already present in the dataset and added a record if it was new. These records were then peer-reviewed by members of the MOLA editorial team.

PEER REVIEW PROCESS

MOLA uses a peer review process to collect data from a broad array of sources while maintaining accuracy and reliability on a small budget.

To preserve these editorial standards, MOLA's editors review contributions for:

- **Accuracy:** All information in MOLA is drawn from reliable primary and secondary sources.
- **Completeness:** MOLA endeavors to review all available open-source information about a case before publication, and updates cases as new information becomes available.
- **Attribution:** Sources are properly cited and attributed in text and source fields.
- **Credit:** Contributors to MOLA are credited by name (or handle, if contributors prefer not to be named publicly).

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[14] See the current MOLA editorial team: "Team," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/team.

[15] Omeka is a project of the Corporation for Digital Scholarship, who make a series of free and subscription-facilitated digital humanities research tools including Zotero. See: Omeka.net, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.omeka.net/.

[16] In 2024, MOLA project staff used the web crawler ScrapeGraphAI, a Python library for searching, scraping, and indexing content online, to search the web for records of repatriation cases that were not reflected in MOLA's initial dataset. MOLA also used LLMs (large language models, such as ChatGPT) to direct searches through a prompt that the user provides. Once cases were identified with these tools, they were manually reviewed and—when fit for inclusion—manually added to the dataset. For more on the ScrapeGraphAI methodology, see: "Introduction," ScrapeGraphAI, accessed September 1, 2026, https://docs.scrapegraphai.com/introduction.

- **Privacy and libel review:** MOLA reviews all contributions to ensure that they do not violate U.S. privacy, defamation, or libel laws.
- **Data integrity:** MOLA uses stable links generated by the Internet Archive and Archive.today to preserve data integrity in online sources and perform regularly scheduled data preservation.

MOLA has made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the data included in this report. Due to the nature of the data collection by a diverse, international team of volunteer contributors and the inherent opacity of grey market transactions, there are no doubt some errors and inconsistencies in the MOLA dataset that are corrected as they are discovered.[17]

ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

As discussed above, MOLA collects data on a total of 57 different fields for repatriation cases.[18] Data availability varies considerably across cases, and complete information for all fields is not available for most cases, as would be expected for a study of a grey market. As such, MOLA's analysis generally focuses on the subset of repatriation cases for which specific data are available.

MOLA began its analysis for this report by looking at the following fields:

Value Fields	Returnee Fields	Returner Fields	Contextual Information
Last Known Price, Valuation or Estimate	Country of Origin	Returning Entity	Criminal Behaviors Alleged
Year of Last Price	Receiving Country	Sending Country	Reason for Return
Value in 2024 U.S. Dollars[19]	Year Returned		

Figure 2. MOLA, Fields of analysis of the repatriation data, 2025.

ECONOMIC MEASURES

MOLA collects market valuation data on repatriated antiquities from a variety of public sources: public auctions, dealer catalogs, law-enforcement seizures (which often cite values from legally required market appraisals), seized dealer business records, museum acquisition data, and other sources. Given that market valuations of antiquities can vary considerably over time, MOLA selected the most recent market valuation available and normalized it to 2024 U.S. dollars using currency converters and inflation calculators.

[17] If you identify errors or omissions in the data, or have related questions, please contact MOLA at MOLA@achillesresearch.org.
[18] Of these fields, four are internal fields such as Case Number, Research Notes, and Authorship Credits, and four are for citation of Sources, Images, Documents, etc. See the complete data structure: "Contribute," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/contribute.
[19] MOLA normalizes historical values to 2024 USD, while acknowledging the limitation that values for antiquities on the art market can vary over time.

To estimate the value of repatriated objects for which no economic data are available, MOLA took an average of similar returns and used that to extrapolate an estimated value of those objects by multiplying the number of objects by the average value.

The market data and estimates MOLA collected for repatriated antiquities capture a single value at a single point in time, adjusted to 2024 U.S. dollars. As such, they do not account for changes in value over time or for the many transactions that may occur along an object's path before its return. In trafficking cases, these can include payments to looters, smugglers, and intermediaries; in others, dealer and auction markups. A broader estimate of the economic impact of repatriation that accounts for these variables is beyond the scope of this report.

FINDINGS

1. BILLION-DOLLAR IMPACT

While antiquities have myriad values as cultural, historical, religious, and informational objects, they are also often treated as assets in the art market, an inherently economic enterprise driven by a desire to profit from the sale of these cultural goods.

While estimates, the valuations captured in the MOLA dataset underscore the significant financial implications of repatriation for a variety of art market actors, including dealers, collectors, museums, and auction houses.

MOLA has valuation data for 621,062 of the 1,057,991 repatriated objects in its dataset, or 58% of the total. The value of those repatriated antiquities exceeds $2.06 billion in 2024 U.S. dollars. Notably, more than $1.6 billion of that value came from repatriations from the United States.

One case dominates these figures. The Black Swan Hoard (see Finding 4) accounts for 595,000 of the valued objects and $789 million of their value. Excluding it, the remaining 26,062 valued objects are worth more than $1.27 billion.[20]

The average value per object with a known valuation is $3,323.[21] If this average is applied to the remaining 436,929 objects without known economic values, it yields a total estimate of over $3.5 billion for all repatriated objects in the MOLA dataset.

These figures should not be read as a measure of the illicit antiquities trade, whose size is hotly debated in scholarly and policy communities. The dataset includes material that was legally excavated, such as the Machu Picchu collection returned to Peru by Yale University, as well as objects that never entered the market, such as the Black Swan Hoard. Still others, such as objects taken during the colonial period and returned voluntarily, raise ethical questions but generally fall outside modern legal frameworks. Subsequent analysis of MOLA data will offer a closer look at the role of the illicit trade, which accounts for a substantial share of the returns MOLA documents.

[20] See: "Black Swan Hoard," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/2161.
[21] This average value per object obscures the wide variation in values that are seen from case to case. Some repatriation cases have dozens or hundreds of objects valued in the hundreds of dollars, while others represent a single high-value object, or large collections of high-value antiquities seized from a single collector or institution.

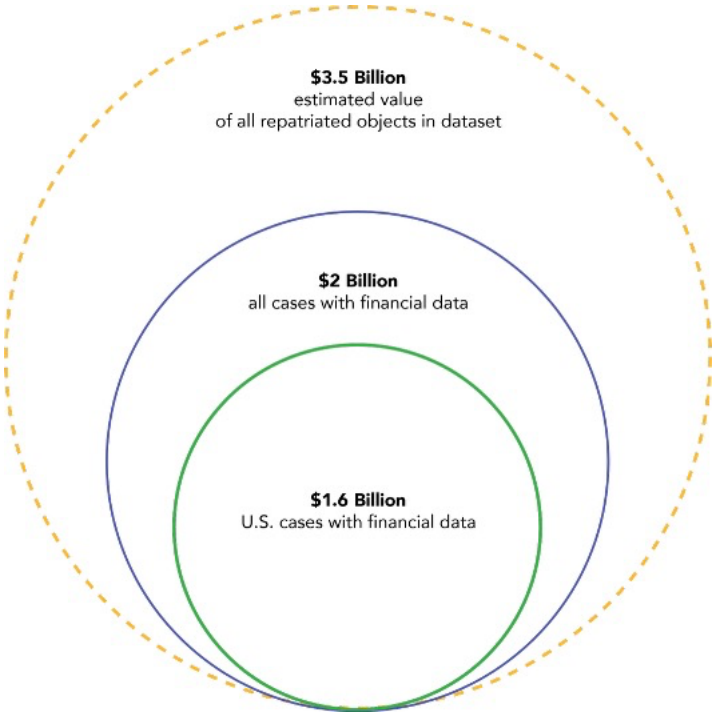

Figure 3. MOLA, Documented and estimated value of repatriated antiquities, 2025.
Documented valuations for 621,062 objects total more than $2.06 billion in 2024 dollars, including $789 million for the Black Swan Hoard. Applying the average value per valued object ($3,323) to the remaining 436,929 objects yields an estimated total of more than $3.5 billion.

2. A GROWING TREND

MOLA data show a marked increase in repatriations over the past three decades, whether measured by cases, objects, or value.

Returns have increased sharply over the past two decades, with recent years accounting for a growing share of cases, objects, and associated value. In 2024—the largest year on record by number of cases—more than 140 cases involving tens of thousands of objects were documented worldwide. In parallel, the value associated with returns has also risen sharply, exceeding $250 million in 2023. Across these indicators, the economic and institutional stakes are clearly growing, not receding.

Figure 4. Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Gold Coffin of Nedjemankh, photograph, Wikimedia Commons, 2017. Looted from the Minya region of Egypt in 2011, it was seized from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and returned to Egypt in 2019.[22]

The data analyzed include repatriations from 1950 to September 2025. When analyzed by number of repatriation cases, the data show a clear surge in repatriations starting in the mid-1990s and peaking in 2024, the last complete year documented.

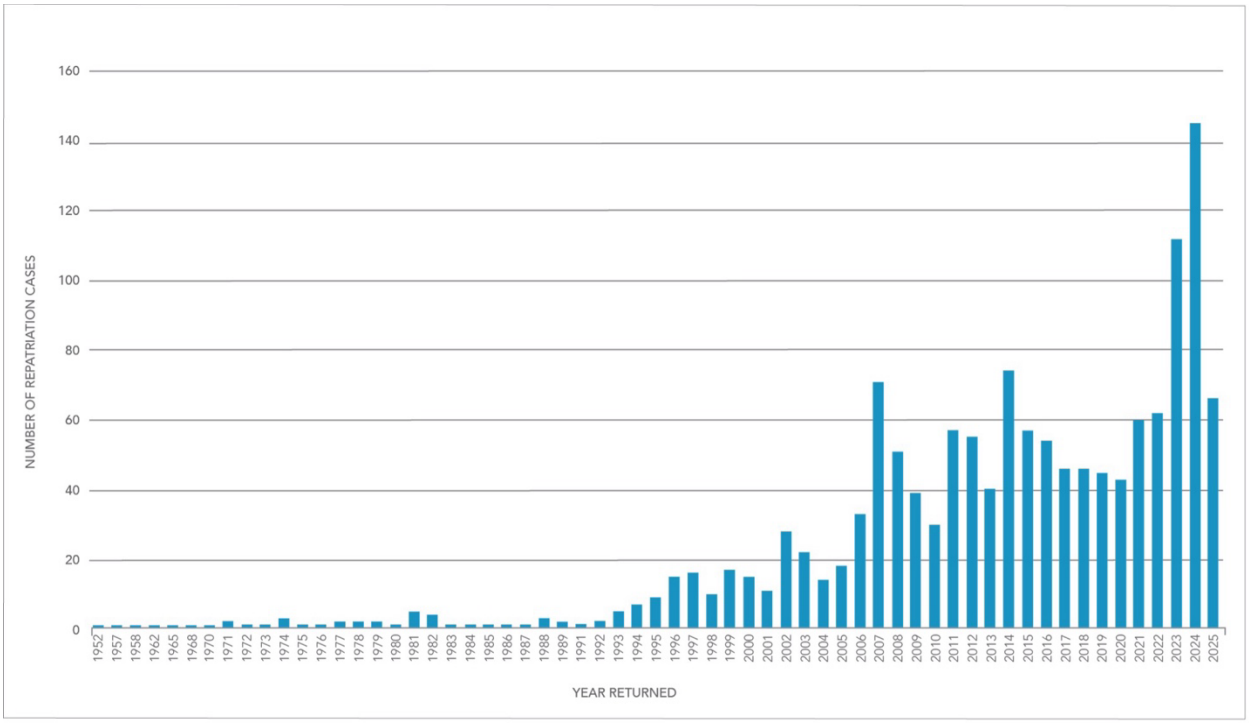

Figure 5. MOLA, Number of repatriation cases by year, 2025.

By number of objects, the data show several peaks beginning in 2010, with four years exceeding 40,000 objects (excluding the Black Swan Hoard).

[22] U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Ancient gold coffin repatriated to Egypt in New York ceremony," U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, September 26, 2019, https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ancient-gold-coffin-repatriated-egypt-new-york-ceremony.

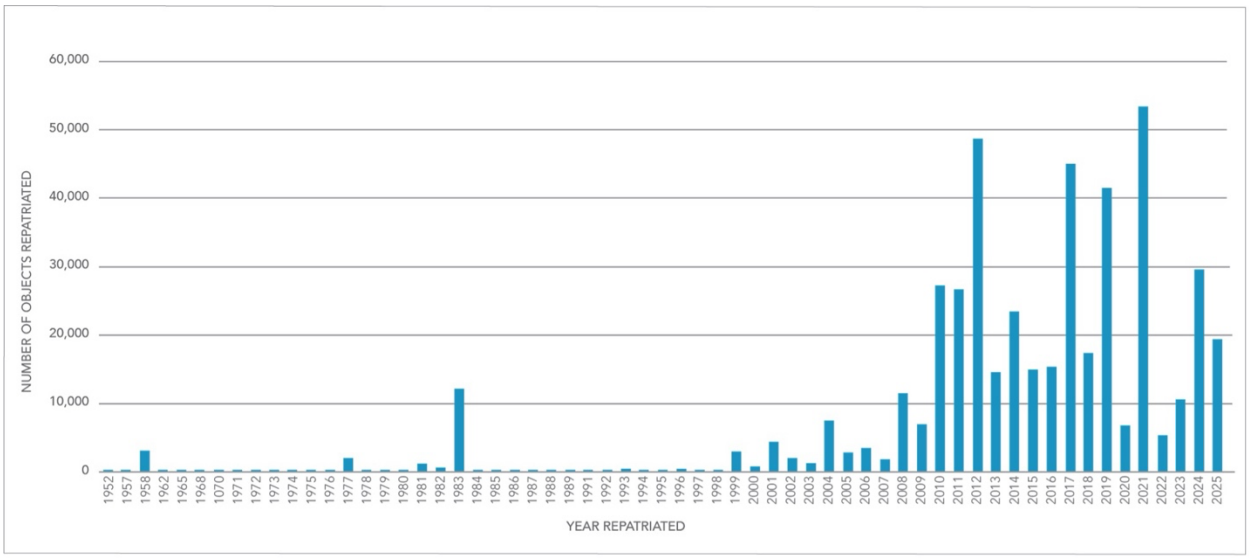

Figure 6. MOLA, Number of objects repatriated by year, 2025. This excludes the 2012 repatriation of the Black Swan Hoard.[23]

Most of the documented valuations in the dataset come from the past two decades, when the number and value of repatriations began to spike. No valuation data are available prior to 1972.

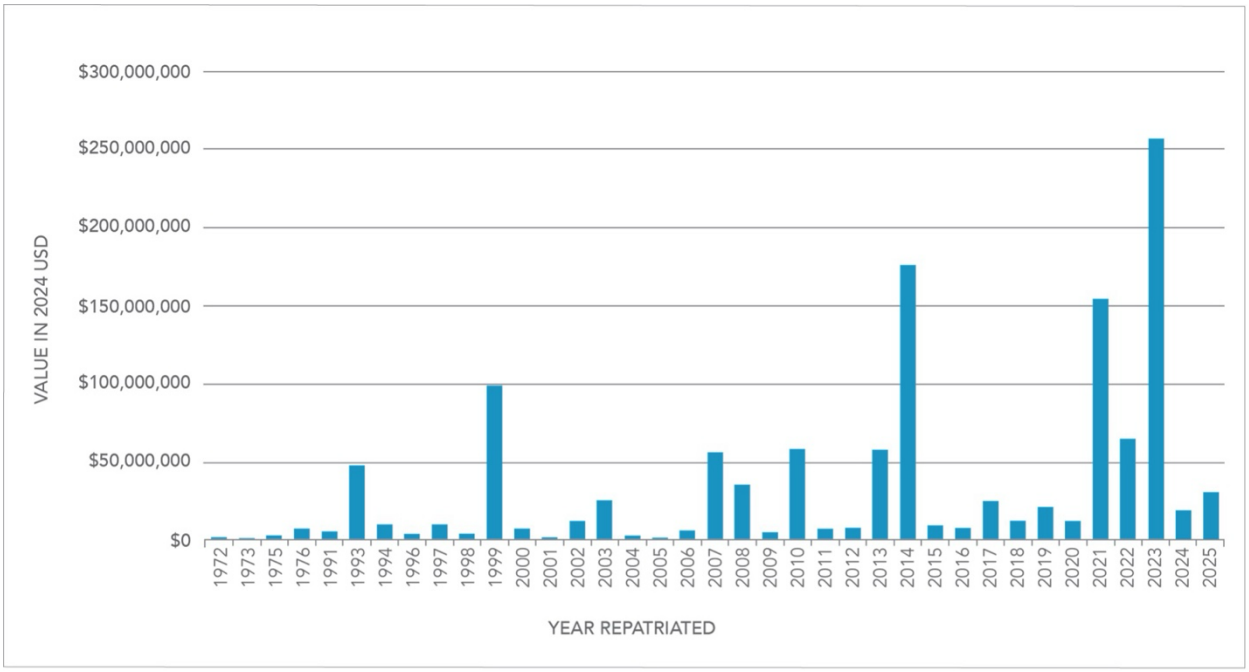

Figure 7. MOLA, Value of repatriations by year since 1972, 2025. This excludes the 2012 repatriation of the Black Swan Hoard.

[23] For visual clarity, some charts do not include the outlier case of the 2012 repatriation of the Black Swan Hoard, an assemblage of 595,000 coins worth over USD $789 million. This case is removed due to skewing the scale of the graphs. For detail on this case, see: "Black Swan Hoard," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/2161.

Taken together, these figures show that repatriation is a growing trend around the world by a variety of measures. Some of this growth likely reflects better documentation of recent cases, which are more readily found online. But the scale and consistency of the increase across cases, objects, and values suggest a real and sustained trend.

3. REPATRIATION IS A GLOBAL ISSUE

The surge in repatriations documented above began in the mid-1990s with sustained repatriation campaigns led by a handful of Mediterranean countries, most notably Italy, Greece, Türkiye, and Egypt. But in the years since, both claims and successful returns have spread around the globe, as more countries seek to recover artifacts.

MOLA has documented repatriations to over 100 countries and dozens of sovereign Indigenous nations. These returns arise from varied circumstances—including contemporary trafficking investigations, colonial-era removals, and claims involving Indigenous cultural heritage—showing that repatriation is not confined to a single region, historical context, or pathway.

Figure 8. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Seated in Royal Ease, photograph, Wikidata, 2023.
Late tenth-century copper alloy sculpture with silver inlay. The statue was sold to the Metropolitan Museum in 1992 by Douglas Latchford and returned to Cambodia in 2023.[24]

[24] Max Hollein, "Recent Repatriations to Cambodia and Thailand," Metropolitan Museum of Art, December 18, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/recent-repatriations-to-cambodia-and-thailand; and "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara Seated in Royal Ease," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39184.

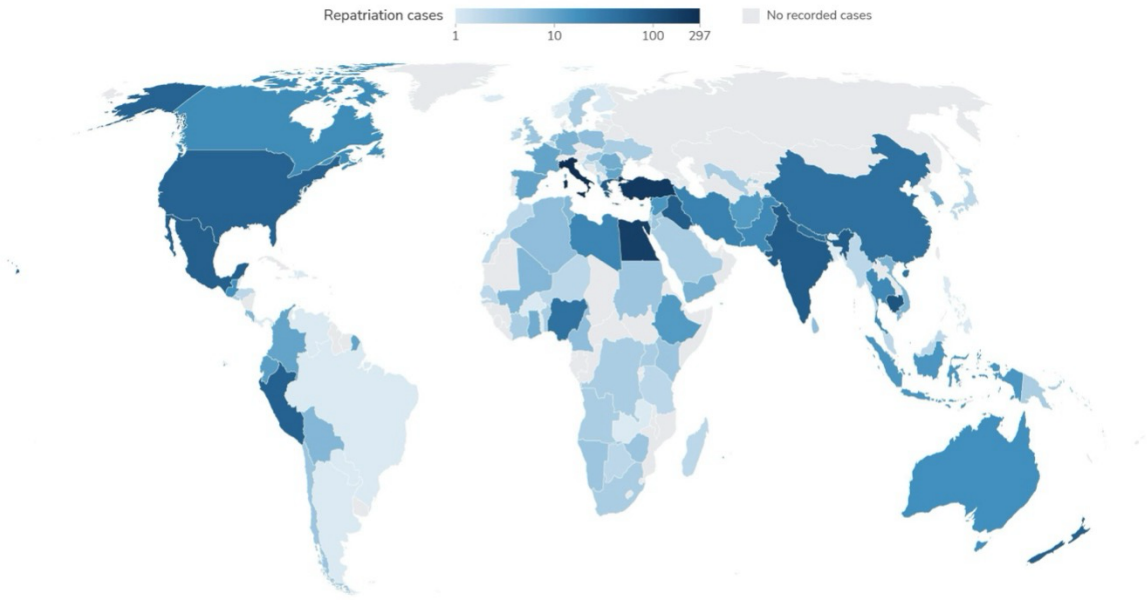

Figure 9. MOLA, Receiving country by number of repatriation cases, 2025. Darker shading indicates more repatriation cases received; the color scale is logarithmic.

The geographic breadth of these cases reflects the many different histories behind them. Objects are returned from market countries, most often the United States and Western Europe (see Figure 16), to countries of origin across the globe, sometimes after passing through transit countries along the way. Those returns take place through a wide range of legal, diplomatic, law enforcement, and institutional mechanisms.

4. SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT IS ASSOCIATED WITH MORE RETURNS

Countries that have made repatriation a sustained priority—including Egypt, Italy, Iraq, Peru, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye—are among those receiving the largest numbers of returned objects in the MOLA dataset. All have used a variety of measures to secure these returns: public and legal campaigns, diplomatic engagement, and participation in international conventions and bilateral agreements. Although the data do not establish the effect of any single measure, the pattern suggests that sustained attention and coordinated action can strengthen a country's ability to secure returns.

Egypt, Türkiye, and Peru have each received more than 50,000 objects. In the case of Peru, 40,000 of those objects are from a single repatriation of Machu Picchu material from Yale University, which initially had permission to borrow these artifacts but failed to return them.[25] Türkiye and Egypt, by contrast, have been actively seeking the repatriation of cultural objects from global sources for decades, and the scope of their returns reflects, at least in part, the success of those efforts.[26]

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[25] See: "The Machu Picchu Collection," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/1191.

[26] Angela Stienne, *Mummified: The stories behind Egyptian mummies in museums* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

Several factors have contributed to the success of countries recovering looted antiquities: dedicated law enforcement teams that specialize in cultural property crimes, such as Italy's Carabinieri TPC; sustained government-led international pressure campaigns and legal actions to demand the return of looted objects, such as Egypt's; and active civil society groups that raise awareness and pressure governments to take action, such as the India Pride Project[27] and the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign.[28]

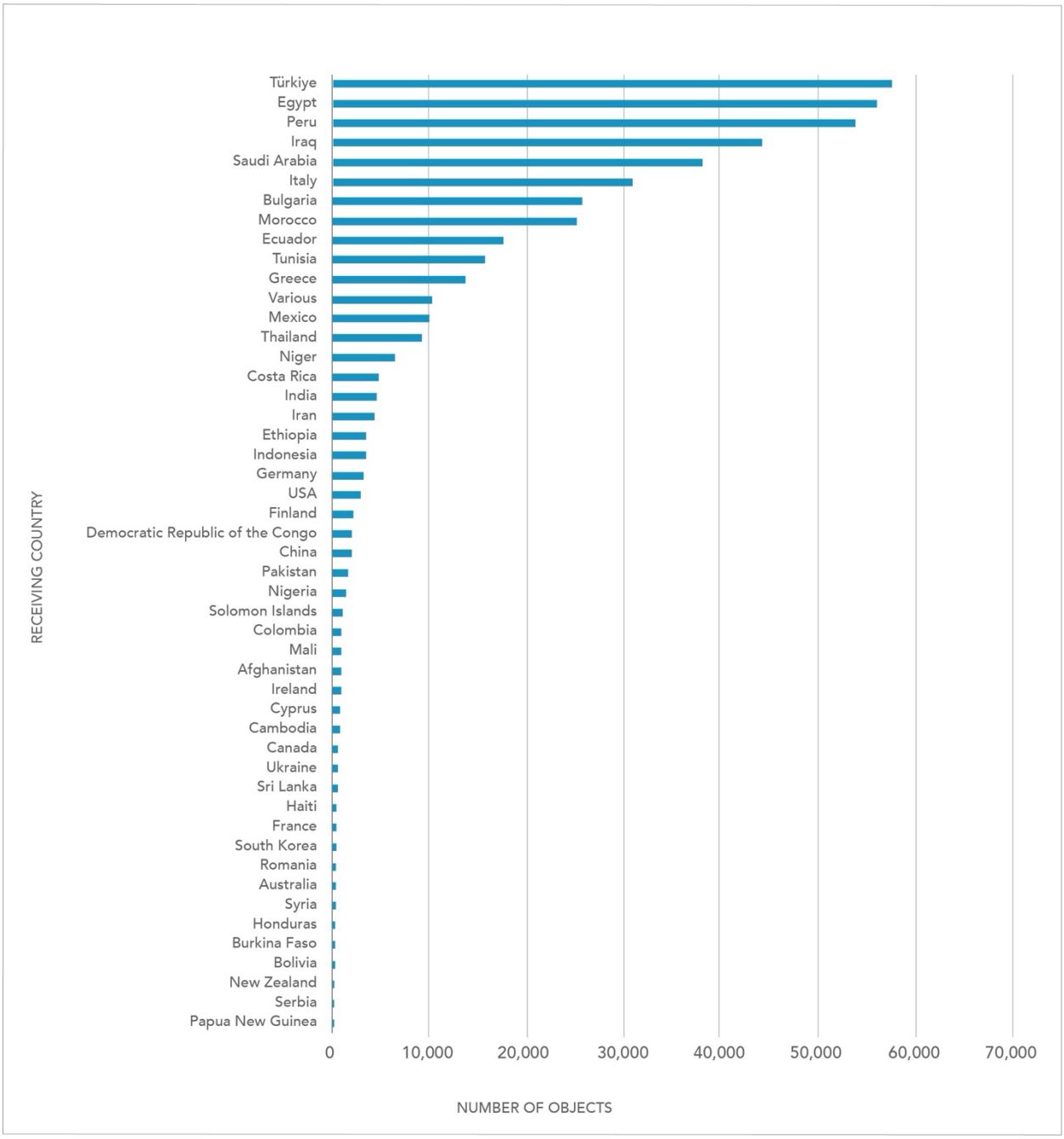

Figure 10. MOLA, Top receiving countries by number of objects, 2025. Every country shown has received more than 50 total objects. This excludes the 2012 repatriation of the Black Swan Hoard.

[27] India Pride Project, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.ipp.org.in/.
[28] "About Us," Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign, accessed September 1, 2026, https://nepalheritagerecoverycampaign.org/.

The data show that the adoption of international instruments and bilateral agreements also appears to be associated with repatriations. All the top receiving countries have adopted the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and many were early adopters.[29]

Country	UNESCO Adoption Year	Number of Objects Recovered
Türkiye	1981	57,564
Peru	1979	53,847
Saudi Arabia	1976	38,127
Iraq	1973	44,144
Egypt	1973	56,076

Figure 11. MOLA, Top receiving countries and UNESCO 1970 adoption, 2025.

Some countries that have yet to adopt the UNESCO 1970 Convention, such as Thailand, have nevertheless recovered many antiquities. However, law enforcement sources who have worked with those countries often note the challenge of establishing a claim in the absence of such instruments.[30]

Some market countries, such as the United States and Switzerland, implement the UNESCO 1970 Convention through bilateral agreements. As of September 2026, the U.S. has adopted import restrictions—usually through Cultural Property Agreements (CPAs) or unilateral emergency import restrictions—for 37 countries. These include Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Belize, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Canada (expired), Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Nicaragua (expired), Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Syria, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.[31]

As noted by Patty Gerstenblith, a leading authority on cultural property law: "For the countries with which the United States has a bilateral agreement, such an agreement is the single most effective means of preventing the import of objects illegally exported after the date the agreement went into effect."[32]

MOLA data on repatriations to countries with U.S. CPAs offer mixed support for this view. A sample of repatriations to those countries suggests CPAs may have contributed to an increase in recoveries from the United States for some countries, while less so for others:

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[29] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

[30] See, for example, Operation Antiquities, in which U.S. authorities recovered hundreds of Thai antiquities from California museums and dealers but struggled for years to return those objects to Thailand: "Robert Olson Collection," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/2200.

[31] "Current Agreements and Import Restrictions," U.S. Department of State, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.state.gov/current-agreements-and-import-restrictions; and "Closing U.S. Markets to Illicit Antiquities," Antiquities Coalition, accessed September 1, 2026, https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/developing-implementing-solutions/closing-u-s-markets-to-illicit-antiquities/.

[32] Patty Gerstenblith, "Influenced, Influence: The Evolution and Future of Cultural Heritage Law," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 13 (2025): 128-41, https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2024.34.

Country	CPA Year	Objects Recovered Before	Objects Recovered After
Cyprus	2002	4	293
Cambodia	2003	11	77
Greece	2011	327	376
Libya	2018	0	8
Guatemala	1997	70	19
Nigeria	2022	52	5

Figure 12. MOLA, Object recoveries by country and CPA adoption, 2025. Because CPAs took effect in different years, the before and after periods vary in length: for Nigeria, whose CPA dates from 2022, the "after" period covers less than four years, while for Guatemala it covers nearly three decades.

These emergency restrictions and agreements have the added benefit of drawing international market attention to looting and trafficking of cultural property from that country, especially in cases of ongoing armed conflict.[33] Other tools such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Red Lists can also draw attention to areas experiencing new or significant looting.[34] Bilateral agreements can also increase law enforcement and diplomatic cooperation as well as capacity-building efforts, all contributing to the potential increase for repatriations.[35]

It remains to be seen whether the adoption of these agreements itself is inherently helpful to recoveries, or whether it merely reflects a broader government effort to recover antiquities by these countries. Because governments do not publicly track the use of these instruments in repatriation efforts, a closer analysis of cases would be required to tease out their impact on repatriation.

[33] For example, see: Yenişafak English AA, "Syria recovers 36 looted antiquities worth $5M from US," *Yeni Şafak*, September 9, 2026, https://en.yenisafak.com/world/syria-recovers-5m-in-looted-antiquities-from-us-3723705; and see: Ukrinform, "U.S. introducing import restrictions to protect Ukraine's cultural heritage," *Ukrinform*, September 11, 2024, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3904624-us-introducing-import-restrictions-to-protect-ukraines-cultural-heritage.html.

[34] International Council of Museums, "Red Lists Database," accessed September 1, 2026, https://icom.museum/en/resources/red-lists/.

[35] For example, the Afghan government's April 2021 emergency request to the U.S. under the Cultural Property Implementation Act to restrict the import of certain at-risk archaeological materials received joint support from U.S. market stakeholders. See: Kate Fitz Gibbon, "Art Market Organizations Stand Together Against Illicit Trade: CINOA joint statement brings together art market on Afghanistan," *Cultural Property News*, October 12, 2021, https://culturalpropertynews.org/art-market-organizations-stand-together-against-illicit-trade/.

Case Study: The Black Swan Hoard

The Black Swan Hoard case is a notable example of how the scale and circumstances of a single repatriation can significantly influence broader dataset trends.

In 1804, the British navy sank a Spanish naval frigate—the *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*—off the coast of Algarve, Portugal. It was traveling back from the then-Spanish colony of Peru and carried a hoard of coins.[36]

It lay on the seafloor until 2007, when the Florida-based commercial salvage company Odyssey Marine Exploration reported a shipwreck. They used "Black Swan" as the location's code name.[37]

After salvage work was completed, approximately 17 tons of eighteenth-century silver and gold coins were recovered. Odyssey Marine Exploration shipped the objects to the United States and did not notify the Spanish government of their finds.[38]

When Madrid learned that the Odyssey's treasure came from the historical *Mercedes* shipwreck, it triggered a long-term legal battle in the U.S. to recover the artifacts. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) considers the Odyssey's actions as trafficking in cultural property in its case law database.[39]

In 2009, a Florida United States District Court ruled that the Black Swan Hoard fell under the ownership of Spain. Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court denied an appeal by the Odyssey to overturn this ruling.[40] The Black Swan Hoard of over 590,000 coins then returned to Spain. Upon their recovery, the Spanish ambassador to the U.S. Jorge Dezcallar proclaimed, "It is our duty to remember the lives of those sailors who perished and complete this operation satisfactorily for their memory."[41]

This single case, whose 590,000 coins are valued at nearly $800 million in 2024 dollars, accounts for a significant portion of the total value and number of objects in the MOLA dataset.

The Black Swan Hoard case also demonstrates how sustained engagement—in this example, years of litigation by a national government—can contribute to the global increase in repatriations.

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[36] *El País*, "Odyssey takes $500 million treasure appeal to US federal court," *El País*, May 24, 2011, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2011/05/24/inenglish/1306214446_850210.html.
[37] Alan Zarembo and Karen Kaplan, "Claim of deep-sea treasure called murky," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2007, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-may-19-sci-shipwreck19-story.html.
[38] *El País*, "Odyssey takes $500 million treasure appeal."
[39] "Case Shipwreck Mercedes," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, accessed September 1, 2026, https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/case-law-doc/traffickingculturalpropertycrimetype/usa/2012/case_shipwreck_mercedes.html.
[40] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Case Shipwreck Mercedes."
[41] María Picatoste, "El tesoro de «Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes» regresa a España," *ABC*, February 24, 2012, https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-odyssey-hercules-despegan-201202240000_noticia.html.

5. SPECIALIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Specialized cultural-property units are responsible for some of the most substantial and sustained recoveries documented by MOLA.

In 2017, in the capital of the global art market, the Manhattan District Attorney's office created the Antiquities Trafficking Unit, a dedicated team of investigators, analysts and prosecutors led by Assistant DA Matthew Bogdanos to address antiquities trafficking and related crimes.[42] As of September 2026, nearly a decade later, the Antiquities Trafficking Unit—working with specialized investigators such as U.S. Homeland Security Investigations and international partners—has recovered approximately 6,400 objects valued at $495 million and returned approximately 6,250 of them to 40 countries.[43]

Italy's Carabinieri TPC is another example of a highly effective, dedicated law enforcement branch. In 2025, the Carabinieri TPC recovered 75,009 pieces of cultural property valued at €73 million ($82 million) and returned 146 items to 14 countries. During 2024, the Carabinieri TPC had similar results, recovering 74,734 objects valued at €130 million ($146 million) and returned 550 items to 12 countries.[44]

These results illustrate how sustained expertise, resources, and international cooperation can support recovery and return when criminal violations are identified and pursued.

Antiquities are repatriated for a variety of reasons. Sometimes there is a formal legal process that leads to a court-ordered return, while more often antiquities are returned in response to a claim from a country of origin, or seized by law enforcement acting on a court order. Increasingly, antiquities are being returned voluntarily by possessors for ethical reasons.

To track the reasons for return, MOLA classifies repatriations into six categories:

- Claim from a country of origin
- Court ordered return or civil forfeiture
- Law enforcement seizure
- NAGPRA claim (or similar laws granting ownership to Indigenous nations)
- Voluntary return (absent a forfeiture, seizure, or claim)
- Other (such as loans and partage)

An analysis of 1,228 cases for which reason for return information is available shows that the largest category of cases involves law enforcement seizures.

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[42] Ariel Sabar, "The Tomb Raiders of the Upper East Side: Inside the Manhattan DA's Antiquities Trafficking Unit," *The Atlantic*, November 23, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/bogdanos-antiquities-new-york/620525/.
[43] Manhattan District Attorney's Office, "D.A. Bragg Announces Return Of 36 Antiquities To The People Of Syria."
[44] "Pubblicazioni," Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage.

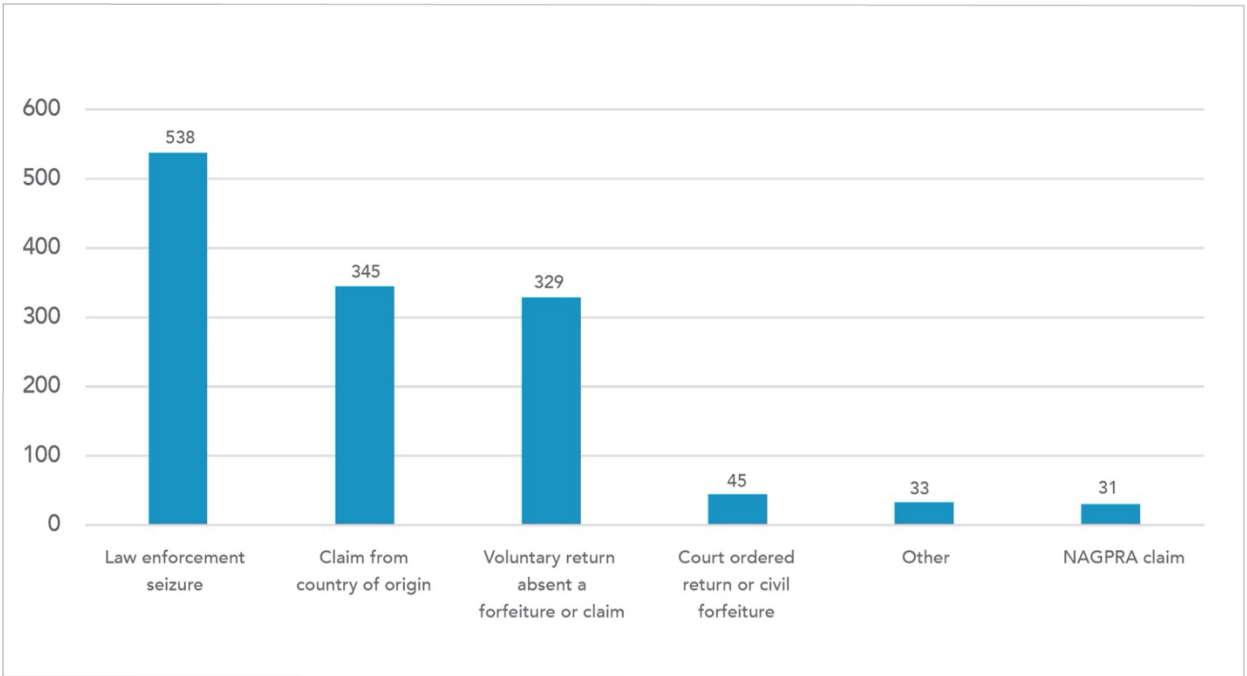

Figure 13. MOLA, Reason for return by number of cases, 2025. Many cases have multiple reasons for return, and are therefore represented multiple times in this graph, once for each relevant category.

Figure 14. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Limestone Head of Assyrian King Sargon II, photograph, ICE, 2015, https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ancient-antiquities-and-saddam-hussein-era-objects-returned-iraq. Seized by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Homeland Security Investigations in August 2008 and formally repatriated to Iraq in March 2015.[45]

[45] U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Ancient antiquities and Saddam Hussein-era objects returned to Iraq," U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, March 16, 2015, https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/ancient-antiquities-and-saddam-hussein-era-objects-returned-iraq.

Case Study: Operazione Demetra

In July 2018, the Carabinieri's Tutela Patrimonio Culturale ended its largest-ever investigation: Operazione Demetra.[46] The Carabinieri TPC serves as the national, specialized "art squad" for the Italian government. In Demetra, it unraveled an organized crime group that trafficked more than 22,000 looted and counterfeit archaeological objects.[47]

The investigation began in 2014, when the Carabinieri conducted anti-mafia operations in Riesi, Sicily.[48] They found a "complex criminal organization" allegedly led by Francesco Lucerna, in which he constructed a network of *tombaroli*—or tomb raiders—to loot archaeological sites in Sicily and sell the artifacts to collectors in northern Italy.[49] The Carabinieri investigation of Lucerna led to the discovery of an international smuggling network. According to TPC, three branches of *tombaroli* acted beneath Lucerna.[50] They facilitated the transport of looted antiquities through William Veres, a Hungarian art dealer and the alleged head of this "archaeo-trafficking ring."[51]

The Carabinieri concluded Veres' looting network to be a "transnational criminal organization" that successfully infiltrated the legal art market and operated across borders. More than 250 Carabinieri officers worked on the case, collaborating with the London Metropolitan Police, the Baden-Württemberg Criminal Police, and the Spanish Guardia Civil.[52] By issuing European Investigation Orders, the coordinated cross-border enforcement effort with EUROPOL and EUROJUST conducted over 50 simultaneous raids.[53]

Authorities recovered over 22,000 Greco-Roman coins and 453 archaeological artifacts, collectively worth around €40 million ($45.9 million).[54]

When specialized law enforcement and governmental bodies are in place, such as the Carabinieri, results follow.

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[46] Simon Willis, host, *The Professor*, season 1, episode 1, "The Nativity," Brazen, November 27, 2023, 39 min., 26 sec, https://brazen.fm/the-professor/.
[47] Willis, "The Nativity."
[48] Riccardo Arena, "Sicilia saccheggiata: smantellata un'organizzazione criminale che trafugava reperti archeologici nell'isola per rifornire le case d'asta di Monaco di baviera – 23 persone arrestate, il giro d'affari della holding di ladri d'arte e tombaroli era di 20 milioni di euro," *Dagospia*, July 5, 2018, https://www.dagospia.com/cronache/sicilia-saccheggiata-smantellata-organizzazione-criminale-dedita-traffico-177935.
[49] The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime, "Carabinieri TPC, Operazione 'Demetra'. Ecco le novità," The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime, July 4, 2018, https://www.journalchc.com/2018/07/04/operazione-demetra-dei-carabinieri-tpc-ecco-le-novita/.
[50] Procedimento Penale n. 717/18 R.G., 2173/14 R.G.N.R., Tribunale di Caltanissetta, Jan. 11, 2022.
[51] The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime, "Carabinieri TPC."
[52] The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime, "Carabinieri TPC."
[53] Anna Somers Cocks, "Will the UK Be Able to Take Part in Antiquities Busts after Brexit?," The Art Newspaper, November 14, 2018, https://production.tan-mgmt.co.uk/2018/11/14/will-the-uk-be-able-to-take-part-in-antiquities-busts-after-brexit; "Traffico Di Reperti Archeologici, Operazione 'Demetra', Il Favarese Stagno Torna in Libertà," *Grandangolo Agrigento*, July 28, 2018, http://www.grandangoloagrigento.it/traffico-di-reperti-archeologici-operazione-demetra-il-favarese-stagno-torna-in-liberta/; and Lynda Albertson, "Operation Demetra: The Trafficking of Sicilian Archaeological Treasures," Association For Research Into Crimes Against Art, July 4, 2018, https://art-crime.blogspot.com/2018/07/operation-demetra-trafficking-of.html.
[54] Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, *Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale: Attività Operativa 2018* (Digital World S.R.L., 2018), https://www.journalchc.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Attivita-Operativa-2018.pdf.

6. U.S. MUSEUMS ACCOUNT FOR SIGNIFICANT RETURNS

MOLA has recorded 101,472 cultural objects returned by 81 U.S. museums—or roughly one in ten of all documented returns, or more than one in five excluding the Black Swan hoard. About 40% of these objects come from a single case, Yale University's return of Machu Picchu material to Peru.

Valuation data are available for 40,391 objects returned by 29 of those institutions and total over $312 million; extrapolating from those data yields an estimated value of $785 million for all documented U.S. museum returns. These returns occurred under varied circumstances, including law enforcement seizures, legal claims, and increasingly, voluntary action.

Figure 15. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Celestial Dancer (Devata), photograph, Wikimedia Commons, 2022. Mid-eleventh-century sculpture, Chandela period, from Madhya Pradesh, India. Trafficked by convicted antiquities smuggler Subhash Kapoor. The sculpture was returned to India in 2024.[55]

The prominence of United States museums in returning antiquities reflects several factors. Many built their collections later than their European counterparts, at a time when domestic laws, international treaties, and shifting social norms began to raise concerns about museum acquisition policies. American museums were often better funded than their counterparts abroad and competed vigorously for acquisitions, frequently accepting objects with little or no evidence that they had been legally excavated and exported.[56] The country also hosts the world's largest art market and numerous large private collections, which are often donated to museums, encouraged by U.S. tax incentives.[57] Finally, law enforcement data on their seizures and returns are often disclosed publicly and covered in the press, making them easy to document.[58]

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[55] Manhattan District Attorney's Office, "D.A. Bragg Announces The Return Of More Than 1,400 Antiquities To The People Of India," press release, November 13, 2024, https://manhattanda.org/d-a-bragg-announces-the-return-of-more-than-1400-antiquities-to-the-people-of-india/.

[56] Clare McAndrew, *The Art Basel & UBS Art Market Report 2025* (Arts Economics, 2025), https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/the-art-market-2025/welcome; and Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World's Richest Museum* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

[57] McAndrew, *The Art Basel*; and Donna Yates, "Museums, collectors, and value manipulation: tax fraud through donation of antiquities," *Journal of Financial Crime* 23, no. 1 (2016): 173-86, http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JFC-11-2014-0051.

[58] For example, see: Manhattan District Attorney's Office, "D.A. Bragg Announces Return Of 36 Antiquities To The People Of Syria."

U.S. museums have been at the center of many prominent repatriation efforts in recent years, as countries of origin seek the return of looted objects identified in their collections, which are increasingly searchable online. Some of the entities that have faced the largest number of repatriation cases, including major institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Museum of the Bible, have been the subject of intensive scrutiny from the press and law enforcement.[59]

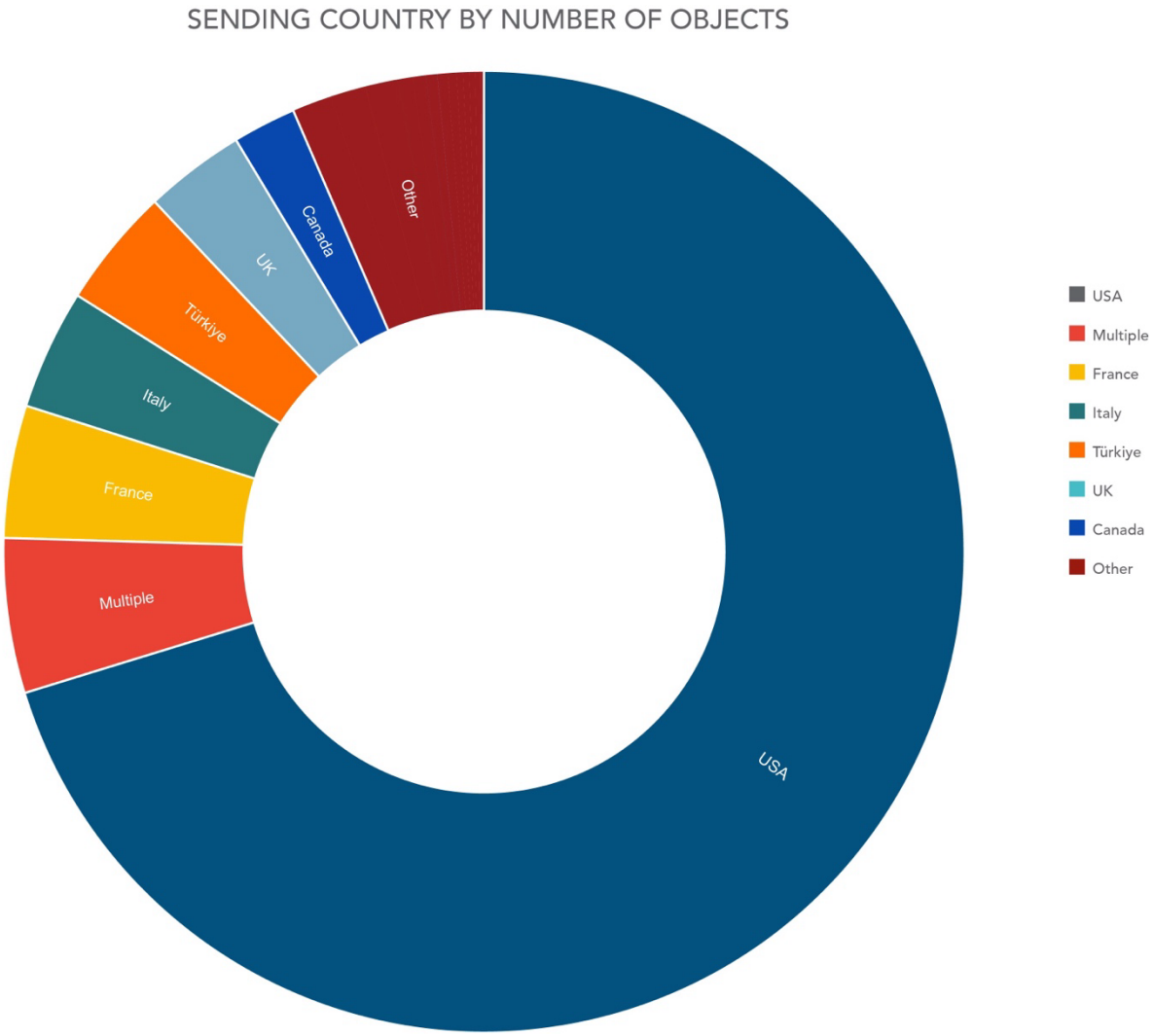

Figure 16. MOLA, Sending country by number of objects returned, 2025.

[59] "The Getty Aphrodite," Museum of Looted Antiquities, accessed September 1, 2026, https://mola.omeka.net/items/show/1200; Spencer Woodman, Malia Politzer, et al, "More than 1000 artifacts in Metropolitan Museum of Art catalog linked to alleged looting and trafficking figures," *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, March 20, 2023, https://www.icij.org/investigations/hidden-treasures/more-than-1000-artifacts-in-metropolitan-museum-of-art-catalog-linked-to-alleged-looting-and-trafficking-figures; Graham Bowley and Tom Mashberg, "With New Seizures, Value of the Met's Looted Artifacts Tops $95 Million," *New York Times*, June 30, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/30/arts/design/met-returns-looted-artifacts-95-million.html; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Hobby Lobby settles $3 million civil suit for falsely labeling Cuneiform Tablets," U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, July 5, 2017, https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/hobby-lobby-settles-3-million-civil-suit-falsely-labeling-cuneiform-tablets; and Patty Gerstenblith, "Hobby Lobby, the Museum of the Bible and the Law: A Case Study of the Looting of Archaeological Artifacts from Iraq," in *Antiquities Smuggling in the Real and Virtual World*, ed. Layla Hashemi and Louise Shelley (Routledge, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from MOLA's analysis detailed above suggest several clear recommendations that should be prioritized in future policies and procedures at the international, state, institutional, and art market levels.

FOR INTERNATIONAL BODIES

- Provide technical assistance to governments and communities that lack the resources to document missing cultural objects, assemble claims, and participate in cross-border investigations and returns.
- Support multilingual data collection and partnerships outside North America and Europe so that global assessments do not reflect only the best-documented cases.
- Encourage the use of common categories for seizures, forfeitures, negotiated settlements, voluntary returns, and other repatriation mechanisms so that data can more easily be compared across jurisdictions.

FOR STATE GOVERNMENTS

- Designate a national point of contact to coordinate repatriation claims, maintain records of completed returns, and communicate with foreign governments, law enforcement agencies, media, and civil society groups.
- Publish non-sensitive information about completed seizures, forfeitures, settlements, and returns, including the objects involved, the parties, the reason for return, and the legal or administrative mechanism used.
- Ensure that customs agencies, police, prosecutors, and cultural authorities share information about cultural-property cases and establish procedures for coordinating investigations and returns.

FOR MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

- Preserve public collection records after objects are returned, updating those records to identify the recipient and explain the reason for return rather than removing the objects' histories from public view.
- Establish and publish written procedures for provenance research, repatriation claims, negotiated settlements, and voluntary returns.
- Share relevant provenance and acquisition records with countries and communities of origin, as well as the media and civil society groups, subject to appropriate privacy and legal restrictions.

FOR THE ART MARKET

- Treat repatriation as a foreseeable market risk. The objects documented in this report carry more than $2.06 billion in documented value, much of it established through auction sales and dealer

transactions. Dealers, auction houses, and collectors should account for the possibility of future claims in acquisition, pricing, and insurance decisions.

- Conduct enhanced due diligence before sale. Antiquities carry distinct risks, including looting, illegal export, false provenance, and competing ownership claims by countries of origin and Indigenous Peoples, that call for more extensive provenance research and documentation than other categories of art. That research should be adequately resourced and completed before sale. The absence of an object from a stolen-art database should not, by itself, be treated as evidence of lawful ownership or export.
- Collect, retain, and disclose records. Keep provenance, transaction, consignor, and import-export records, and make them available to buyers, appropriate authorities, and claimants. Provenance histories disclosed to potential buyers should be complete, not selective.
- Establish procedures for responding to claims. Publish how claims will be received and evaluated, including when contested lots will be withdrawn, and preserve sale records for objects that are later returned, so that their histories remain available to researchers and the public.
- Align sales standards with museum acquisition policies. Objects sold without the provenance major museums now require risk becoming "orphans" that cannot later enter public collections and remain vulnerable to future claims.

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