There's an App for Everything – Even INTERPOL Investigations

International art crime sounds like something that only happens in heist movies, but stolen artifacts are relatively common in the market. Even Kim Kardashian had to forfeit one of her purchases, an ancient Roman sculpture, earlier this year after customs authorities in Los Angeles detained it based on its unclear provenance and contradictory documents of sale. Italy's Ministry of Cultural Heritage found that there were no export records for the sculpture and deemed it a looted artifact. [1]

To combat the illegal transport of artwork, bolster the search for stolen art, and raise awareness of this kind of crime, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) created an app called ID-Art. Released in the spring of 2021, the app allows anyone with a smart phone to help in the fight against the trafficking of cultural heritage. [2]

The app, available for free on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, gives users access to INTERPOL's Stolen Works of Art database.[3] At this time, there are over fifty thousand works in the database, including Pierre August Renoir's *Still Life with Peaches*, an ancient Egyptian amulet in the shape of a hedgehog, Jan Vermeer's *The Concert*, and a Fabergé teapot.[4] Users – whether they are art dealers, collectors, customs agents, or the general public – can see if art objects are registered in the database by uploading a photo and performing a reverse image search or by searching with criteria like artist name and time period.[5]

The app also keeps track of the state of threatened cultural heritage sites via a crowd-sourcing method. Users can upload photos and descriptions of these sites, usually located in places with unpredictable extreme weather or in war zones, to maintain an idea of the condition of the sites as well as whether they have been looted.[6]

UNESCO estimates that the "illicit trade in cultural goods" is worth nearly $10 billion each year, although exact numbers are difficult to predict for an underground market that sometimes provides funding for criminal and terrorist groups.[7] Laws surrounding requirements of provenance vary from country to country, so it is not uncommon for artworks with dubious ownership history to end up for sale at major auction houses or elsewhere on the market.[8] The ID-Art app will allow people working in the art market to have access to a list of specific stolen artworks and a direct line of communication to a law enforcement organization focused on trafficked cultural heritage. The app can give users greater confidence that they are not unwittingly handling illegally imported works. [9]

Some users have noted the subjective meaning of the word "stolen," implying that the app does not recognize that many artworks currently on display in major Western museums are

[1] https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kim-kardashian-looted-italian-sculpture-1964390

[2] https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-launches-app-to-better-protect-cultural-heritage

[3] https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-launches-app-to-better-protect-cultural-heritage

[4] INTERPOL ID-ART.

[5] https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-launches-app-to-better-protect-cultural-heritage

[6] https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-launches-app-to-better-protect-cultural-heritage

[7] https://en.unesco.org/news/real-price-art-international-unesco-campaign-reveals-hidden-face-art-trafficking

[8] https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/14358-interpol-launches-app-to-help-combat-looted-art-trade

[9] https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/interpol-launches-app-help-people-report-stolen-art-180977700/

from countries formerly under colonial power.[10] Ultimately, the app is meant to help law enforcement agencies locate art whose location is unknown, not address the hotly-contested ethics of these museums, but it may lead to a larger conversation about the ownership of cultural artifacts.

The app is still in its first few months of operation, so its level of success remains to be seen. However, its pilot phase has already helped Italian and Dutch police recover two stolen works each.[11] With ID-Art, INTERPOL has increased transparency in its mission to prevent trafficking of stolen artwork and included both art industry players and the public in the fight.

-- *Cates Saleeby*

Summary: In the spring of 2021, INTERPOL released an app called ID-Art that is meant to help prevent the trafficking of stolen artwork. The app is aimed at both people who are generally interested in cultural heritage and art industry professionals who can use it to check the provenance of the works they sell and alert INTERPOL to potential stolen works.

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[10] https://hyperallergic.com/644391/report-stolen-art-interpol-app/
[11] https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/interpol-launches-app-help-people-report-stolen-art-180977700/