

**Erik Nemeth**, *Cultural Security: Potential Value of Artworks and Monuments to Foreign Policy*  
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Thank you for the gracious introduction. Good afternoon.

I initially ventured into cultural security to take a break from the sciences. After work in computer science and neuroscience, I decided to balance my knowledgebase with the humanities and social sciences. As an integration of art history, economics, and political science, cultural security offered a convenient opportunity.

While working on the concept at the Getty Research Institute, I began to realize the potential of the humanities as a point of intersection for interdisciplinary studies. For example, after studying the human visual system, I appreciated the synergy of neuroaesthetics. Neuroaesthetics integrates modern knowledge of how the brain works with centuries, if not millennia, of work in aesthetics and art appreciation.

With cultural security, I am exploring the present-day role of art, cultural artifacts, and monuments in foreign policy, economics, and even international security.

### **But what is Cultural Security?**

I come up with two seemingly opposing definitions:

- Preserving cultural traditions and representations of culture, such as artworks and monuments, or
- enabling integration of cultures to foster cooperation between nations.

So, one protects existing culture, while the other uses culture as a medium for foreign relations.

Recent rhetoric by officials in China illustrates the former. In the fall of 2011, President Hu Jin Tao reportedly used the phrase “cultural security” in warning of the adverse influence of western pop culture. Pop music in particular was cited such that Lady Gaga was cast as a security threat.

Recent developments in the international art market illustrate the second definition. New wealth in China and India has expanded the art markets in each nation. Last year, sales of artworks by a Chinese contemporary of Picasso exceeded those of the master for the first time. Competition within the art market also enables nations to integrate foreign cultural heritage. A recent example is the acquisition of Cezanne’s “The Card Players” by the Royal Family of Qatar. The private sale occurred in 2011, and reports confirming the \$250 million purchase price came out last month.

Not only does the sale demonstrate high cross-cultural interest, but the record setting, if not eclipsing, price reestablished the market stature of 19<sup>th</sup> century works. Throughout the past decade, 20<sup>th</sup> century works by Picasso, Klimt, de Kooning, and Pollock had surpassed Van Goghs by selling at over \$100 million. Interestingly, an Arab nation reestablished the significance of a Western artwork similar to Japanese collectors investing in Impressionist and Post Impressionist works in the 1990s.

Rhetoric of “cultural security”, as reportedly employed by Chinese officials, unproductively pits protection of cultural heritage against culture as a medium for cooperation. Both definitions not only are relevant to national security and economic development but also can work together to foster foreign relations.

A couple of images illustrate the integration of both definitions of cultural security.

- Destruction of the giant statues of Buddha in, Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan, Taliban, 2001
- Return of paintings by Klimt from the national museum, Austria to Maria Altman of Los Angeles, 2006

In the first case, a Buddhist monument was perceived as a threat to Muslim culture. From the point of view of the Taliban, destruction of the monument protected Islam while also seeking to garner support of Muslims worldwide. In the second case, artworks were seized by Nazi authorities as part of a broader campaign to preserve a particular idea of fine art, and more than 50 years later, the return of the artworks symbolized restitution for ethnic persecution. In both cases, artworks or monuments played a tactical and symbolic role, or in the parlance of Joseph Nye, hard power and soft power combine as smart power.

### **Destruction of monuments and plunder are not a new tactic in warfare.**

Destruction of monuments is not a new tactic in warfare. In 330 BC, forces of Alexander the Great destroyed the Palace of Xerxes in Persepolis in retaliation for destruction in Athens a century-and-a-half earlier. What has evolved is the strategic role of destruction. Traditionally plunder occurred after military conquest as a finalizing act of domination and accordingly did not require much planning. Now plunder occurs as an antecedent to armed conflict, and destruction may occur in as an act of political violence in place of armed conflict. For example, Nazi plunder of Jewish art collections occurred leading up and during World War II. In the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Taliban publicized threats to demolish the statues a couple of years prior and capitalized on media coverage leading up to the act in February of 2001.

So, the role of cultural property in foreign policy has been formalized in two respects. Aggressors have realized the strategic value of cultural property, and in response to risks to cultural property in conflict, the international community established the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property during Armed Conflict* at The Hague in 1954. Strategic destruction and international conventions have, in turn, developed the role of cultural security in diplomacy.

### **Exchange of artworks and return of artworks are not new traditions in diplomacy.**

After Waterloo, the British reversed the tradition of “to the victor go the spoils” by returning objects to Italy and other nations, which Napoleon had plundered. What has evolved is the assertiveness with which seemingly less powerful entities will challenge nations or major institutions over the possession of cultural patrimony. In case of the return of the Klimt

paintings, an individual challenged a foreign state institution. In the case of the return of Greek and Roman antiquities, seemingly less powerful nations challenged prominent institutions of a more powerful nation.

Both cases involved debates over the legality of circumstances under which the artworks in question were acquired, but more recently, cultural heritage itself has emerged as basis for claiming rights to possession. A good example is the resolution of the return of Inca artifacts from Peabody Museum at Yale to Peru after more than century.

So, the role of cultural property has developed in foreign relations in two respects. The 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Prevention of Illicit Transfer of Cultural Property* initiated a path for cultural artifacts as a medium for diplomacy, and cases of repatriation created precedents that enabled emerging nations to assert their cultural heritage as an element of power in world politics.

**The roles of artworks and monuments in conflict and foreign relation have evolved.**

The United States has been proactive in protecting cultural property. For example, although only ratifying the 1954 Hague Convention in 2009, the United States effectively minimized collateral damage of sites of cultural heritage in Iraq during the air campaign in 2003. The United States also has bilateral agreements with more than a dozen nations to deter the illicit transfer of cultural patrimony and actively pursues prevention in cooperation with nations in, for example, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the looting of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad in 2003 drew negative press as an indication that intervening nations have responsibility to ensure the security moveable, as well as immovable cultural property. The United States did create the FBI Art Crime Team in 2004 in part to recover looted cultural patrimony, but proactive recovery is only one type of engagement.

The looting of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in 2011 and reports of looting of cultural treasures in Libya illustrate missed opportunities. Protection of cultural property provides an avenue for clandestine diplomacy. For example the United States, while seeking to remain neutral or not engaging militarily, could offer assistance in the protection of cultural property. By discussing the fate of museums and archaeological sites, the United States maintains a channel of communication and garners political goodwill by taking a proactive position on the protection of cultural heritage.

**Further research** can help to understand the interplay of protective and progressive cultural security and to apply cultural security effectively in foreign policy.

With that I would like to thank you for listening, and I welcome your thoughts and questions.