

Heritage protection at ICOM and ICOM UK

At a time when armed conflict is dramatically increasing worldwide, daily reports of the tragic loss of life and worsening humanitarian crises can feel overwhelming. In addition, as heritage professionals, we are acutely aware of the impact of cultural destruction on local communities, whether deliberate or collateral.

At ICOM UK, we have been reflecting on collective actions – past and present - that create positive change by fostering dialogue, pooling expertise and challenging harmful narratives. We are grateful for the support of our members, our partners and international networks who, collectively, help us to make a difference. Individually, we may feel as if we can't make an impact but, together, we can ensure that our colleagues operating within conflict zones don't have to face danger alone.

Cultural heritage during armed conflict

Armed conflict is one of the [greatest threats](#) to cultural heritage globally. Not only is the enforced control of cultural heritage a powerful tool for subjugating peoples and rewriting their histories, but there is also evidence that museums, monuments and other cultural sites are deliberately targeted, destroyed or looted as part of past and current wars, such as those in [Ukraine](#), [Gaza](#) and [Sudan](#). Meanwhile, there are increasingly vociferous calls to strengthen the protection of museums and other cultural heritage in areas of armed conflict.

ICOM and the Hague Convention

Founded in the wake of the Second World War (1939-45), ICOM has a long and distinguished history of active cultural heritage protection. It was the first cultural NGO to develop a [Disaster Relief Task Force](#) to support museums in times of crisis. ICOM also played a central role in developing the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* (also known as the [1954 Hague Convention](#)) which was drawn up by UNESCO. The Convention was the first and most widely recognised international treaty dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflict. Among other things, it stipulated legal responsibilities for states and armed forces to carry out during peacetime and during conflict, and it also established the [International Register of Cultural Property under Special Protection](#).

A review of the 1954 Hague Convention was undertaken in 1991 by the then Vice-President of ICOM - and member of ICOM UK - [Patrick Boylan](#) (1940-2024). This review took account of developments in international humanitarian law as well as the experience of more recent conflicts. It led to the [1999 Second Protocol](#) which implemented a new category of 'enhanced protection' for elements of cultural property designated to be of 'the greatest importance to humankind'. The UK government signed the Convention in 2024, which entered into force in the UK on 1 July 2025.

More recently, [ICOM and UNESCO](#) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate on the protection of cultural property during armed conflict and to fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage.

ICOM and Blue Shield International

Thanks also to Patrick Boylan, in 1996 ICOM became one of the founding four partners of [Blue Shield International](#), alongside the International Council on Archives (ICA); the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA); and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Blue Shield was established to protect the world's cultural property threatened by wars and other complex crises. ICOM maintains a close working relationship with Blue Shield, providing access to a worldwide network of museum professionals and mobilising specialised volunteers to support emergency heritage protection globally. To this day, ICOM is involved as a [Board member](#) and as Chair of the Blue Shield Accreditation Committee, which supports the [creation of new national committees](#).

For ICOM UK, this means that one of our trustees is always dedicated to collaborating with [Blue Shield UK](#). In practice, we currently have two trustees and one former trustee who sit on the Blue Shield UK committee and who participate in expert-led working groups on Conflict and Military Activity, Illicit Trafficking and Underwater Heritage.

ICOM Red Lists

The [ICOM Red Lists of Cultural Objects at Risk](#) are important practical tools to help curb the illicit traffic in cultural property. Free to download, these guides do not depict actual stolen artefacts, but they are illustrative of the kinds of cultural property to watch out for. They are intended to raise awareness and prevent illegal export and sale of vulnerable cultural heritage from specific countries or regions. They serve as tools for police, customs officials, the art market, private collectors and heritage professionals to alert them to potentially trafficked items.

ICOM UK and cultural protection

The protection of cultural heritage is central to ICOM UK's [Strategic Plan for 2025-30](#) which underpins our activities and future initiatives. As such, ICOM UK initiates and welcomes proposals to protect international cultural heritage in its wider sense, both tangible and intangible and before, during and after crisis. We do this through collaborating with other heritage sector partners, public programming, responding to calls for support and by taking part in conferences, panel discussions and online events to share our work and learn from others.

- In 2022, ICOM UK submitted a successful funding application to digitise collections at a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Ukraine. As a partnership between the National Preserve 'Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra', the University of the West of England and ICOM UK, the project was funded by the [ICOM Strategic Allocation Review Committee \(SAREC\)](#).

- The 2024 ICOM UK conference in Belfast explored the theme of [Common Ground – the role of museums in divided communities](#). Speakers attended from Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the UK, with a particular focus on Northern Ireland.
- Also in 2024, ICOM UK collaborated with the V&A Culture in Crisis programme to deliver a webinar series, *Preserving the Past: Strategies for Heritage in Crisis*. The series focussed on different threats (fire, flood and earthquake) and featured UK-based heritage professionals in conversation with specialists from the Caribbean, Kathmandu and California. Recordings of the webinars can be accessed via the [V&A Culture in Crisis website](#).
- In June 2025, members of the ICOM UK Board took part in the Blue Shield UK [symposium](#) held at the University of the West of England. The event brought together heritage, legal, government, armed forces and law enforcement professionals to discuss threats to cultural property in the UK and to identify areas of collaboration for developing protective measures in UK institutions.
- 2025 also saw the launch of a new guide, [Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine](#). This publication is the result of an international partnership project initiated by the Ukrainian Institute and developed in collaboration with ICOM UK, ICOM Ukraine and the Museums Association, supported by the British Council. It challenges harmful colonial narratives that are less well-known beyond eastern and central Europe. We hope it will inspire the publication of further guides to explain and protect the rich and diverse cultural heritage of different peoples and regions of the world.

ICOM UK Working Group for heritage protection

ICOM UK is a small team with big ambitions to drive meaningful change. As the only UK museum organisation with a dedicated international focus, we are uniquely placed to facilitate conversations between museums in the UK and British Overseas Territories and their counterparts around the world. We recognise that heritage protection can mean different things in different contexts, and we welcome news and case studies to share with our members and our wider networks.

As part of our commitment towards the protection of cultural heritage, we are planning a new Working Group to engage our members more actively in knowledge sharing and skills exchange and to help continue our legacy of cultural protection into the future. Please look out for announcements for how to get involved.

Maria Blyzinsky, ICOM UK Co-chair and Blue Shield UK liaison
 Laura Searson, ICOM UK Trustee and lead on heritage protection
 September 2025