

Protection of mobile cultural heritage

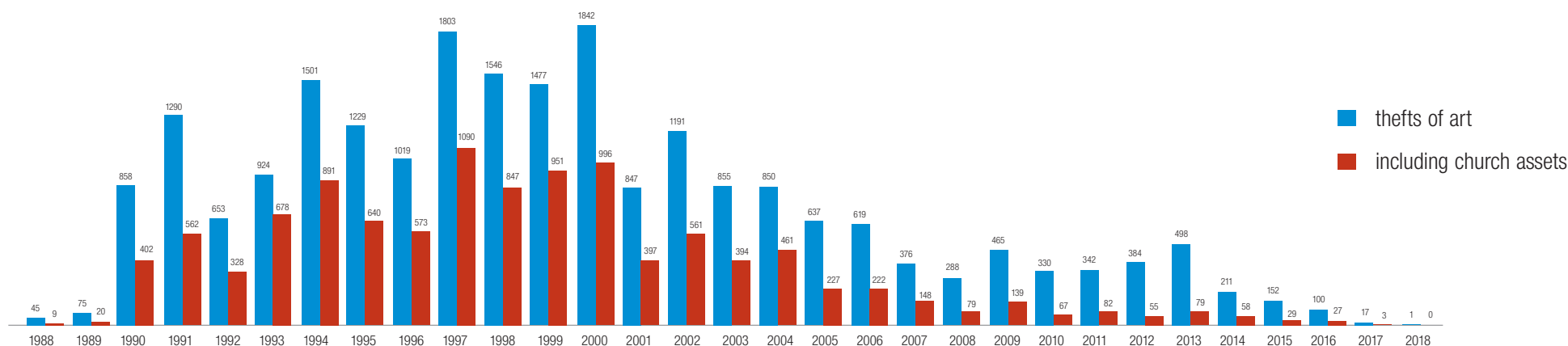
INTEGRATED SYSTEM

of the mobile cultural heritage protection

The current program is based on the Government Decree No. 307, passed on August 28, 1991, which responded to the growing thefts of objects of high sacral or cultural value. This was one of the side effects of the rapid political changes after 1989 – after the borders had opened, the demand for antiquities increased in neighboring wealthier countries, and the stolen valuables became a popular export item. The sources primarily included churches and other buildings with low security level.

The extent and seriousness of this threat is indicated by police statistics; before 1989, there were no more than several dozens thefts / burglaries a year, while in 1991, the number rose to almost a thousand (see the chart). Most objects were stolen from church buildings and facilities. This trend resulted in the loss of almost 15% of the mobile cultural heritage in the Czech Republic annually, and can be compared to the damages caused by wars in previous centuries (such as Hussite wars or Thirty Years War).

One of the immediate impulses for the launch of the protection program in 1991 was the theft of three pictures by Pablo Picasso from the permanent collection of the National Gallery in Prague. The pictures, whose value was estimated to 30 million USD, were quite impossible to sell, and the police managed to trace them and return them in a few months.



The primary aim of the protection program was to fit the exposed objects with the electronic alarm system, and establish their inventory list as soon as possible. Gradually, the program was extended with various other parts that enhanced the original aims: it supported, for example, the purchasing of valuable items to the collections of museums, galleries and the National Heritage Institute; the protection against severe weather; and, last not least, the legal assistance in foreign countries, extending the responsibility of Czech institutions for cultural assets even outside the Czech territory.

From the start, the integrated system of the mobile cultural heritage protection has been defined as a comprehensive set of provisions, including legislation, financial and other system tools that protect the national mobile cultural heritage, and add to its value. In this regard, it's still one of the most comprehensive systems of the cultural heritage protection, even in the international scope.

The activities in this area are based on the Agreement on the Record Keeping of Cultural Assets, reached in terms of Government Decree No. 307 from August 28, 1991, by the Ministry of Culture and Czech Episcopal Conference, which was then followed by further cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Finance.

Currently, the integrated system of the mobile cultural heritage protection is successfully running in organizations established by the Ministry of Culture, cooperating with the Police of the Czech Republic, Ministry of Justice, Customs Administration, Czech Trade Inspection Authority, and last not least, many owners of the cultural heritage. This broad cooperation is then reflected in the international cooperation of law enforcement authorities throughout Europe. Thanks to this cooperation, the stolen items of high cultural value are finally returned to their Czech lawful owners – mainly churches but also the National Heritage Institute.

The return of stolen items to the owner is, however, a difficult process. First, it's necessary to notice the offer of the item for sale. Then documents must be procured that clearly prove the identity of the stolen item so it's clearly identical to the item on offer. Then there are legal steps that enable the return of the item to the owner. How to find out whether the artwork was stolen in the Czech Republic or abroad? In case of items stolen in Czechia, the source is the public police database available in four languages (Czech, English, German, Russian): <http://pseud.policie.cz/wps/portal/>, or in the Interpol database that records thefts of artworks all over the world: <https://www.interpol.int/notice/search/woa>.

