

To the Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Cultural Heritage Center
(ECA/P/C), SA-5, Fifth Floor
Department of State
Washington, DC 20522-0505.

9 May 2016

Dear Committee Members:

I write on behalf of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Association of Art Museum Directors as well as the Association of Art Museum Curators to share thoughts on the renewal of the **Memorandum of Understanding [MOU] between the Governments of the United States of America and the Hellenic Republic Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Categories of Archaeological and Byzantine Ecclesiastical Ethnological Material through the 15th Century A.D. of the Hellenic Republic (signed 17 July 2011)**. I am grateful for the opportunity to submit these comments and look forward to presenting before the committee.

I am the Jack and Mary Ann Frable Curator of Ancient Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, an encyclopedic art museum in Richmond, Virginia. My background includes work with the Israel Antiquities Authority, where I participated on archaeological digs and the preparation of archaeological publications, a Ph.D. in Classical Art and Archaeology, and more than a decade working in departments of ancient art in US museums.

In preparation for this statement, I have done extensive reading on the issues surrounding the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and the United States' enabling legislation of 1983, the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (Public Law 97-446). My statement will focus primarily on exploring ways that this MOU (and the system of MOUs currently being established with many countries) can help American museums serve their diverse communities and constituencies. Much of my statement will focus on the issue of long-term loans of cultural objects that would enable museums to fulfill their deepest mission: encouraging their visitors to explore the richness of human achievement through engagement with the material, cultural and artistic heritage of humanity. In fulfilling this mission, American museums play a vital role in the intellectual and communal health of our diverse, democratic society. Museums fulfill this mission through objects, the very subject of the MOU.

Developing effective means of reducing looting within its territory, the primary goal of the MOU, is a task for the Greek government; I would like to focus on ensuring access to "licit" art and archaeological material for visitors to American museums in the form of both short-term and, especially, long-term loans. One of the ways that museums and curators connect and reconnect with their visitors is through the promise of the new, a new presentation of their collections or a new object never before seen by their visitors. This "newness" is a measure of the vitality of a collection and allows museums to encourage visitors to return to a gallery they have been to before and encounter something different. The number of visitors not only has economic implications for museums, but, more importantly, serves as a measure of the importance of the visual arts in the public realm – in the eyes of casual museum visitors no less than donors and politicians. The outreach aspect of newness is necessary but not

particularly elevating. More important for me, as a curator, is the ability to show visitors to the VMFA something new and cause them to think more deeply and perhaps differently about the past, themselves, the human condition and society. Due to recent efforts to reduce the pillage of archaeological sites across the globe, it has become increasingly difficult for museums to acquire “new-to-us” ancient objects either by purchase or donation; long-term loans from the so-called source countries, therefore, are both the most logical and most ethical way to bring great treasures of the ancient world into the galleries of American museums and thence to the American public. Such loans can also foster greater goodwill and familiarity between nations and inspire museum visitors to learn more, and, perhaps, even visit a nation that has generously lent works from its national collections.

Long-term loans are addressed in the MOU in Article II, paragraphs 7 and 8, concerning “the interchange of archaeological materials for cultural, exhibition, educational and scientific purposes to enable widespread public appreciation of and access to Greece’s cultural heritage.” In section 1 of paragraph 7, the Hellenic Republic undertakes to give “consideration, as appropriate, of accommodating requests for extended loans beyond a five year period to United States museums.” I know of no long-term loans in this country and in discussing this issue with colleagues, there is great uncertainty about how one would go about requesting such loans and whom one would approach in Greece to discuss such loans. Similar uncertainties surround the question of short-term loans. The Hellenic Republic should be applauded for the quality of objects included in touring exhibitions such as *Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections* and *The Greeks: From Agamemnon to Alexander the Great*, but the Republic should also be encouraged to work with American art museums on procedures for including works from Greece in exhibitions organized within this country.

Related to the commitments made by the Greek government in paragraph 7, the government of the United States undertook in Article II, paragraph 8 to “establish an appropriate webpage with links to the websites of Greek museums for the purpose of fostering interchange among peer institutions and other interested parties.” If the United States has established such a webpage, I have been unable to locate it. Furthermore, many of the websites of Greek museums contain very limited information on their collections; currently, even the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, the most important repository of Greek antiquities in the world, shows only a few dozen images on its website and only minimal information accompanies the images.

Nonetheless, the provisions cited above provide a blue print for establishing the procedures and providing the knowledge that would facilitate the introduction of long-term loans into the permanent galleries of VMFA and institutions like mine. Procedures would ideally include the establishment of a department within the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports charged with the facilitation of long-term loans so that American institutions would have a specific point of contact empowered with the authority and means to ensure that loans from Greek collections receive the proper consideration and permissions. The purview of this department might even include the compilation of lists of objects in the state collections of the Hellenic Republic that are pre-approved for such long-term loans. Simple, predictable and reliable loan procedures will enable American curators to work with their administrations and donors to raise the necessary money for loans (in my own institution, for instance, endowments designated for acquisitions cannot be used for loans). The knowledge component of loans should include expanding access to museums and storage sites of archaeological material in Greece via online resources (including images) and more transparent procedures for making on-site visits. Via its Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, the government of the United States might aid in the creation of online collections’ databases of Greek museums and store rooms of archaeological material. If the project were to include surveys of archaeological sites, the database might also contribute to the reduction of pillage by documenting and making available on public databases known archaeological

material. Aside from helping museums identify possible loans, such databases would be a boon for scholarship and contribute to the sharing of knowledge across cultures and national boundaries.

I thank you for allowing me to address this committee and share my thoughts on the MOU. I wholly support the purpose of this MOU and all other efforts to reduce damage to archaeological sites in Greece and throughout the world. It is my hope that the framework established by the MOU can further international collaboration, deepen interest in and knowledge of the cultures of ancient Greece and Byzantium as well as create greater amity between the peoples of the United States of America and the Hellenic Republic.

Sincerely,

Peter J. Schertz, Ph.D.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Jack and Mary Ann Frable Curator of Ancient Art

Board Member, Association of Art Museum Curators