



# WHAT HAPPENED TO OBJECT ID?

*Part II\* in this series examines the use of Object ID since its inception*



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The original aim of Object ID, when it was conceived in 1993, was to help in reporting and ultimately combating art theft worldwide. In 1997, when Object ID was first adopted, the international art community agreed that making an initial record of the details of the existence of art and cultural objects was a critical prerequisite to making it possible to identify objects when lost or stolen. But what has happened in the international community since 1997 as it relates to implementing standards to combat art theft and crime. Has Object ID been implemented on a global scale? And how effective has it been?

\*Read Part I [here](#).

## **Object ID Under the International Council of Museums**

From 1999 to 2004, Object ID was housed at the Council for the Prevention of Art Theft (CoPAT) in the UK. In October 2004, at the General Conference in Seoul, the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Paris-based International Council of Museums (ICOM) signed an agreement giving ICOM worldwide administration and non-exclusive use of Getty's Object ID standard.

“Object ID, no longer a novelty, is well and thriving, having been translated under our supervision into 11 languages, and having been incorporated in programs, manuals, publications on museum

basics, etc.,” John Zvereff Secretary General for ICOM told Fine Art Registry™ (FAR®).

From 2004, ICOM has managed and promoted the Object ID standard and worked with UNESCO and other organizations. Its work has focused on disseminating information about Object ID through its website and publications, organizing workshops on its implementation, as well as working on and promoting new translation initiatives. There are currently translations of Object ID in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Italian, German, Russian, Czech, Hungarian, Korean and Spanish. “Both UNESCO and Interpol continue to organize workshops on the use of Object

ID, and ICOM always makes this training a component of its regional workshops on the fight against illicit traffic,” Jennifer Thévenot, Programme Activities Officer for ICOM told FAR.

### Is Object ID in use worldwide?

Among those listed by ICOM on its Object ID website as using and promoting Object ID is the FBI’s National Stolen Art Theft Program, AXA Nordstern Art

individual collectors,” says Dr. Baca.

Not all in the art community, however, use the international standard, including former participants in the Getty roundtable meetings.

Past president Fela Grunwald represented the Professional Art Dealers Association of Canada at the Getty roundtable meeting of art trade and appraisal experts held at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware in October 1996. The

represented at the time by senior member Stephen Caudana. The organization told FAR they do not currently use Object ID.

“The American Society of Appraisers as an organization does not use or provide this kind of tool,” says Betty Snyder, Public Relations/Marketing Manager for the American Society of Appraisers. “Some of our personal property members may use it, however.”

Nonetheless, Thévenot of ICOM

### How effective has Object ID been?

Thévenot concedes that despite ICOM’s efforts to obtain information from national committees, it has not been possible to compile an accurate list of all the museums using Object ID. Furthermore, after all these years, there is currently no reliable data available that measures the effectiveness of Object ID in combating or even assisting in the reporting of art theft.

When asked about whether such data exists, a representative from Interpol responded, “The forms we send to all Interpol National Central Bureaus to collect stolen cultural property statistics also refers to, 1) the percentage of cases solved, and 2) percentage of items discovered. It is very difficult to receive trustworthy data and the data received never match the real situation at all.”

Interpol said that Object ID is the standard used by all existing databases. They added that Object ID “is to be considered in any case ‘the’ best solution available for the description and identification of objects.”

### Can Object ID be improved?

It has been over a decade since Eleanor E. Fink, who served as Director of the Getty Information Institute (GII), first conceptualized the idea of Object ID. And while Fink is no longer with the GII, she told FAR she is “delighted” that

UNESCO has endorsed Object ID and that ICOM promotes its use. However, Ms. Fink added that she does believe Object ID can be improved upon.

“I do think strategically more could be done with Object ID to make it more readily accessible, to convene meetings around it, and keep improving it,” she says. “I still have a deep interest in Object ID as its birth mother, and have spoken to some foundations about some interesting ideas around Object ID. Perhaps in the near future, you will hear more about it.”

### What Fine Art Registry™ has done to promote Object ID

In 2000, Theresa Franks, founder and CEO of [Fine Art Registry](#), and an avid art collector, sent two pieces to France for authentication. She realized then that if something happened to them, no one would ever know the pieces belonged to her.

Franks began searching for websites that registered artwork for insurance purposes, but found nothing that was both functional and reasonable in price. It was during her research that she came across the Paul Getty Foundation’s 1993 initiative that was to become Object ID. While at the time the initiative was intended primarily for stolen cultural objects, Franks saw much more that could be done and improved upon, especially with the technology currently available. She

focused on what former President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, Harold Williams, stated in the publication, “Protecting Cultural Objects in the Global Information Society, the Making of Object ID.” (1997).

“...In sectors where no documentation for objects exists, Object ID is being adopted as the basis for creating an initial record. ...Object ID can be the basis for achieving compatibility [and in] enabling development of exchange formats among many databases. This publication, then, represents an inauguration rather than a completion. We now ask the many communities involved in the recovery of stolen objects to join with us in propagating and implementing this standard.”

Franks took the Getty’s core standard a step further and invented and patented a system and method of physically tagging art objects ([described here](#)). Fine Art Registry was born. FAR® provides an online permanent art registry where any art object can be registered, ownership transfer can be recorded, theft or loss can be noted and other important functions with regard to ownership and provenance of art objects can be safely kept in an online, publicly accessible worldwide database.

Today, FAR distinguishes itself as the world’s first online permanent registry and marketplace for fine art and collectibles. ☞



Insurance, CINOA, and the J. Paul Getty Trust. Dr. Murtha Baca, Head of Standards and Vocabulary Programs, Digital Resource Management at the Getty Research Institute told FAR that Object ID remains “a subset of documentation for works in the collections” at the Getty. Dr. Baca said the Getty maintains a close relationship with ICOM and the Art Loss Register, two organizations who have dealt with the translation and worldwide distribution and support of Object ID.

“We, ALR and ICOM work with insurance companies to help ensure that Object ID is visible to

Art Dealers Association of Canada (ADAC) does not use Object ID. Sharlene Rankin who serves as Manager of Programs and Operations at ADAC told FAR that while she is familiar with Object ID she was unaware of any instruction to the membership regarding its use.

“Object ID is not something we use in the administrative office officially but we do use something of a similar standard as we facilitate Cultural Property Evaluations,” says Rankin.

Another organization that was part of the roundtable meeting in Delaware was The American Society of Appraisers,

said that efforts to promote and use the international standard have never ceased since it was first launched in 1997, and nearly a decade after its unanimous adoption, “it is indeed alive and healthy.” Thévenot said that several museums worldwide are using Object ID.

“More museums are using it and the Object ID Checklist is being translated into more and more languages,” says Thévenot. “Every once in a while we hear of additional museums using it, for example recently in Ethiopia, where the National Museum has been using it for a long time.”