

Looted treasure *Sun Times (London) 18 June 1995* floods Europe

**by Christina Lamb
Johannesburg**

INTERNATIONAL museum officials and art experts are warning of a massive upsurge in African art theft, which they say is "wiping out the memory of Africa".

The fierce-faced antique wooden African mask or delicately carved terracotta figure might look a treat on the mantelpiece back home. But it was probably stolen from a museum and buying it constitutes an offence.

Elisabeth des Portes, secretary-general of the Paris-based International Council of Museums (Icom), said: "People should be aware that when they buy artefacts in Africa or African antiquities in Europe, everything has almost certainly been stolen from the country of origin. Tourists and collectors should realise that if they buy such items they risk damaging that country's heritage."

Art theft has been on the rise the world over since the 1980s and Africa has become particularly vulnerable. The demand for African artefacts is soaring. Masks, relics and statuettes sell for up to £150,000 a piece. The ability of African countries to prevent looting is highly constrained by economic difficulties, entrenched corruption, political instability and, in some cases, civil war.

Few African museums have adequate security systems or comprehensive inventories of their collections. Icom believes that curators are commissioned by collectors to sell them the ancient relics from their showcases and to replace them with locally made replicas.

Museum officials accuse foreign diplomats, tourists and journalists of looting. During the genocide in Rwanda some foreign reporters allegedly found time to spirit away masks from the palace in Kigali.

"There is no region in Africa which has not been looted," said des Portes. Countries most severely affected include Zaire and Nigeria, which suffered three important thefts last year. The entire collection of the In-

stitute for African Studies of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria was stolen.

Working with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation and Interpol, Icom is campaigning for a global crackdown on illicit art dealing. At the same time it is conducting a series of workshops in Africa to instil a new sense of responsibility in customs and museum officials.

"The situation is terrible for Africa because it has so little written history," said des Portes. "Communities often rely on archeological objects



Benin figure: typical target

and artefacts to tell their stories and if these disappear we lose their history. Stealing items can wipe out the memory of an entire civilisation."

Icom has issued a catalogue of missing items and some have already been recovered. Wooden statues looted from tombs in Madagascar were recently seized in Brussels; some Bankoni terracotta statuettes stolen from the National Museum of Mali were seized in Paris, and a statue stolen from the Museum of Abidjan is on its way back to the Ivory Coast after being seized by police at an auction house in Paris.

But such seizures barely scratch the surface of the multi-million-dollar trade. "It is not an exaggeration to talk of cultural genocide," says Jean Devise, professor of African history at the Sorbonne. "It has reached the point where entire pieces of Africa's past are being destroyed."