Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
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Federal Department of Home Affairs FDHA

Federal Office of Culture FOC

October 2026

FAQ – Frequently asked questions regarding the application of the CPTA

A. General information: import, export and transit of cultural property

The Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property (CPTA, SR 444.1) and its associated implementing Ordinance (CPTO, SR 444.11) entered into force on 1 June 2005. They implement the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO Convention of 1970, SR 0.444.1) and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (UNESCO Convention of 2001, SR 0.444.2) in Swiss federal law.

The CPTA regulates the import of cultural property into Switzerland, its transit and export as well as its repatriation from Switzerland. With this Act, the Swiss Confederation aims to contribute to the maintenance of the cultural heritage of mankind and prevent theft, looting, and illicit import and export of cultural property (Art. 1 CPTA).

Cultural property must be specifically declared as such to the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security when imported, exported or in transit (Art. 4a CPTA). The storage of cultural property in a customs warehouse (customs freeports or open customs warehouses) is also considered as import within the meaning of the CPTA (Art. 19 para. 3 CPTA) and the cultural property must be declared when being stored at the warehouse. Furthermore, the warehouse keeper is required to keep an inventory of all cultural properties stored in the warehouse (Art. 56 and 66 Customs Act, SR 631.0; Art. 182 ff. Customs Ordinance, SR 631.01; Art. 47 and 48 CustA-FOCBS).

Whoever imports, transits or exports cultural property must declare it at Swiss customs as such.

Mandatory information in the customs declaration[1] (Art. 4a CPTA in conjunction with Art. 25 CPTO):

- ✓ Indication that the imported item is **cultural property**;
- ✓ Indication of whether the cultural property is subject to an **authorisation requirement**[2] under Article 24 CPTO. Where applicable, the export licence must be presented to the customs authorities;
- ✓ **Object type** of the cultural property (e.g. statue, sculpture, amphora, mosaic, painting);
- ✓ As precise as possible information on the **place of manufacture**, or – in the case of archaeological or paleontological material, the **place of discovery**;
- ✓ **Dating** of the cultural property;
- ✓ **Dimensions** of the cultural property (height, width, depth, diameter; for coins, the weight in grams to two decimal places is sufficient).

Note 1: In the case of consolidated consignments, the above information is required for each individual cultural property in the consignment. Exceptions apply to homogeneous groups of cultural property, such as coins from the same series of minting, collections of similar Roman fibulae etc.

Note 2: Incomplete customs declarations will be rejected by the customs authorities.

[1] For further information, see 'Remarks of the Customs Tariff - Tares' > FOC – Transfer of cultural property (https://www.bazg.admin.ch/en/remarks-of-the-customs-tariff-tares)

[2] For the authorisation requirement for import and export, see questions 9, 10 and 11 below.

This is provided for information purposes only. The regulations defined in Swiss Federal Acts provide the sole legal basis. All Acts are filed in the Classified Compilation of Federal Legislation: Classified Compilation | Fedlex (admin.ch). Additional information on CPTA/CPTO is available at www.bak.admin.ch/kgt or the website of the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security (FOCBS): https://www.bazg.admin.ch/en/cultural-property-transfer-bans-restrictions (companies) and https://www.bazg.admin.ch/en/transfer-cultural-property-legal-requirements (individuals).

In **customs assessment procedures, the "principle of self-declaration" applies**, according to which the person subject to the declaration obligation bears responsibility for the lawful and accurate declaration of the movement of goods across borders (Art. 18, 21, 25 and 26 CustA). That means the person subject to the declaration obligation **must review each object individually** under his or her own legal responsibility **to determine whether it is cultural property**.

The Federal Office for Customs and Border Security controls the import, the transit and export of cultural property at the Swiss border. Customs clearance (applicable forms, tariff number, etc.) is carried out in accordance with the provisions of federal customs legislation (Art. 19 CPTA and Art. 23 CPTO).

Missing or wrong declaration of cultural property at customs as well as an illicit import, transit or export of cultural property is punishable by law (Art. 24 CPTA).

B. FAQ – Frequently asked questions

1. What is the definition of “cultural property”?

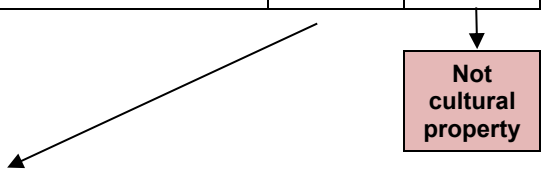
All rights and obligations stemming from the Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property are based on the definition of cultural property given in Art. 2, para. 1 CPTA:

“Cultural property means property that is important on religious or secular grounds to archaeology, pre-history, history, literature, art or science and which belongs to one of the categories specified in Article 1 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention or Article 1 paragraph 1 letter a of the 2001 UNESCO Convention.”

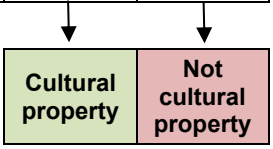
The following checklist helps to determine whether an object is deemed cultural property. The checklist should be completed according to the principle of self-declaration. Questions I and II must be answered.

If at least one of the sections under Question I and under Question II are answered “yes”, the object is cultural property.

I. Does the object belong to one of the categories listed in the 1970 UNESCO Convention (art. 1) or the 2001 UNESCO Convention (art. 1 para. 1 let. a)?	**Yes**	**No**
• rare collections and specimens of fauna, flora, minerals and anatomy as well as objects of palaeontological interest	❑	❑
• property relating to history, including the history of science and technology, military and society history, to the life of national leaders, thinkers, scientists and artists and to events of national importance	❑	❑
• products of archaeological excavations (including regular and clandestine) or of archaeological discoveries	❑	❑
• elements of artistic or historical monuments or archaeological sites which have been dismembered	❑	❑
• antiquities more than one hundred years old, such as inscriptions, coins and engraved seals	❑	❑
• objects of ethnological interest	❑	❑
• property of artistic interest such as: pictures, paintings and drawings produced entirely by hand on any support and in any material (excluding industrial designs and manufactured articles decorated by hand); original works of statuary art and sculpture in any material; original engravings, prints and lithographs; originals of artistic assemblages and montages in any material	❑	❑
• rare manuscripts, incunabula, old books, documents and publications of special interest (historical, artistic, scientific, literary, etc.) singly or in collections	❑	❑
• postage, revenue and similar stamps, singly or in collections	❑	❑
• archives, including sound, photographic and cinematographic archives	❑	❑
• articles of furniture more than one hundred years old and old musical instruments	❑	❑
• traces of human existence of a cultural, historical or archaeological nature which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years (e.g. artefacts, human remains)	❑	❑



II. Is the object significant for one of the areas listed in Art. 2 para. 1 CPTA?	**Yes**	**No**
• archaeology	❑	❑
• pre-history	❑	❑
• history	❑	❑
• literature	❑	❑
• art	❑	❑
• science	❑	❑



2. When is an object “significant” within the meaning of Art. 2 para. 1 CPTA?

Whether property is significant under Art. 2 para. 1 CPTA cannot be determined in a general sense but is rather determined on a case-by-case basis.

An object is furthermore deemed significant if:

- it is exhibited or worthy of exhibiting in a museum;
- its loss would represent a loss to the cultural heritage;
- it is of public interest;
- it is relatively rare;
- it is mentioned in specialised literature.

In general, archaeological objects are considered as significant. According to the Federal Council dispatch regarding the implementation of the CPTA it was also determined that **archaeological objects are generally regarded as significant.** Especially, as architectural objects are often subject to looting and illicit import and export (FF 2002 505, p. 542).

Archaeological cultural property must therefore be declared as such at the Swiss border. Since entry into force of the CPTA on 1 June 2005, this practice has been confirmed by numerous judicial decisions.

3. Are there examples of objects that have been deemed cultural property?

Yes, the following link provides examples of cultural property:
https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/what-is-considered-cultural-property-under-the-federal-act-on-the-international-transfer-of-cultural-property-cpta

The following chart shows a selection of objects which have been treated as cultural property by judicial decisions; these objects were confiscated and returned to the country of origin.

Image of object	Description	Origin	Restitution
	Terracotta sculpture depicting a pregnant female canid (*Colima Pottery Dog Form Vessel*) Pre-Columbian 300 B.C. - 600 A.D. Dimensions: 27.5 x 14 x 17 cm	Mexico	23.11.2022
	Terracotta incense burner, probably representing a seated deity (*Easter Nahua Pottery Deity Effigy Censer (Xantil))* Pre-Columbian 1300 - 1500 A.D. Dimensions: 16 x 9.7 x 27.5 cm	Mexico	23.11.2022

	Byzantine solidus, 7th century CE and sesterce of Diva Faustina, 2nd century CE	Serbia	23.04.2017
	Jug, balsa-wood vessel, bowl with base and fragment of a female torso of terracotta, 6th century BCE, Magna Grecia	Italy	11.07.2016
	Head of a king, Ancient Egypt, New Kingdom, 18th–19th Dynasty Dimensions: 23 X 23 X 31 cm Chalk sculpture	Egypt	01.06.2015
	Two Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets, 3rd to 1st century BCE Dimensions: 4.5 X 4.5 cm and 3.2 X 3.2 cm	Iraq	23.11.2015
	Terracotta statue from the Han Dynasty, around 200 BCE Dimensions: H 47 cm	China	11.12.2014

4. Does the FOC provide an expert opinion on whether an object is cultural property and must be declared?

The Specialised Body for the International Transfer of Cultural Property and Looted Art provides information on issues of the transfer of cultural property to interested parties (Art. 18 CPTA). It can provide general information on the provisions of the Cultural Property Transfer Act; it does not, however, offer advice on declaring individual objects. In customs assessment procedures, the "**principle of self-declaration**" applies, according to which the person subject to the declaration obligation bears responsibility for the lawful and accurate declaration of the movement of goods across borders (Art. 25 ff. CustA).

5. Does the FOC provide an expert opinion on the financial value of cultural property?

To determine the financial value of cultural property, a private expert must be consulted. The Specialised Body for the International Transfer of Cultural Property and Looted Art provides no expert opinions.

6. What is the definition of the terms: origin, provenance, dispatching country, export country etc.?

The meaning of these terms depends on the context in which they are used. An absolute definition for the expressions is therefore not always possible. The following chart, however, offers a frame of reference for using the terms (list not conclusive).

Context	Usage
CPTO	According to CPTO, origin or provenance of cultural property is, in principle, the place an object was manufactured or found.
Customs offices	In customs declaration, a difference is made between the terms "origin" and "dispatching country". Origin refers to the country where an object was entirely obtained or manufactured or where its last significant processing took place. Dispatching country refers to the country from which an object was sent to the Swiss customs territory (art. 10 "Verordnung über die Statistik des Aussenhandels", SR 632.14)
Museums	Within the context of museums, "origin" refers to the provenance, which also describes the ownership of an object (cf. ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums: https://www.museums.ch/fr/espace-professionnel/themes-specialises/lethique-gage-davenir-1153.html)

Note: The definition of a term may also differ according to the language used. For instance, the German term "Provenienz" and the French term "provenance" may be translated or described differently.

7.1 What controlling element should be used when registering cultural property at customs for import?

911	Cultural property which is listed in the appendices to a bilateral agreement* and directly imported from this state to Switzerland (subject to authorisation).
912	Other cultural property.

*The current list of states having concluded a bilateral agreement on the import and repatriation of cultural property with Switzerland can be found via this link: https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/bilateral-agreements-ov

7.2. What "statistical key" should be used when registering cultural property at customs for export?

911	Cultural property which is entered in the Federal Registry or in Cantonal Registries and subject to authorisation.
912	Cultural property which is listed in the appendices to a bilateral agreement.
913	Other cultural property.

The Federal Registry can be viewed here:
https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/federal-registry-cantonal-registries

The currently existing cantonal registries can be viewed here:
https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/federal-registry-cantonal-registries

The current list of all bilateral agreements and their appendices can be viewed here:
https://www.bak.admin.ch/de/bilaterale-vereinbarungen-ov

8. Can the FOC provide information about an object that has been provisionally seized at customs, in adherence with CPTA?

The FOC is not competent to provide any information regarding such cases. The Federal Office for Customs and Border Security is authorised to provisionally seize suspect cultural property during import, transit and export (art. 19 CPTA and art. 104 CustA). In such cases, the competent customs office informs the person subject to the declaration obligation that the shipment in question is suspect cultural property (possible breach of the CPTA), and that inquiries within the authorities will be made. Further information cannot be provided until these inquiries have been completed – not even about the duration of the seizure.

9. When importing an object into Switzerland, is there a requirement to present the export licence issued by the foreign country?

The requirement to **present an export permit upon import** applies for all dispatching countries that have concluded a **bilateral agreement** with Switzerland and that provide for such an export permit in their national legislation (Art. 7 CPTA, Art. 24, para. 3 CPTO). The person subject to the declaration obligation must determine with the responsible authorities of the dispatching country under the principle of self-declaration whether an export permit is required. If no export permit can be presented, the planned import is illegal (Art. 24 para. 1, letter c CPTA).

Bilateral agreements concluded by Switzerland*		
Country	Date of signing	Entry into force
Ivory Coast	30 Jun 2025	14 Jun 2026
Bolivia	30 Sept 2025	11 Jan 2026
Türkiye	15 Nov 2022	04 May 2023
Mexico	24 Aug 2017	25 Jul 2018
Peru	12 Jul 2016	19 Oct 2016
China	16 Aug 2013	8 Jan 2014
Cyprus	11 Jan 2013	15 Feb 2014
Egypt	14 Oct 2010	20 Feb 2011
Colombia	1 Feb 2010	4 Aug 2011
Greece	15 May 2007	13 Apr 2011
Italy	20 Oct 2006	27 Apr 2008

*Further information on bilateral agreements is available at the website of the Federal Office of Culture: www.bak.admin.ch/kgt > Bilateral agreements

10. When exporting an object, is there a requirement to present an export licence authorised by the Swiss Confederation?

Only those objects listed in the Federal Registry for Cultural Property require a permit for a temporary export out of Switzerland. The Specialised Body for the International Transfer of Cultural Property and Looted Art issues this permit (Art. 5 CPTA). This applies exclusively to cultural property owned by the Swiss Confederation. You can access the Federal Registry at the following link: https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/federal-registry-cantonal-registries

11. When exporting an object, is there a requirement to present an export licence issued by a Swiss cantonal authority?

In some cases, cantonal law limiting the export of cultural property may apply; as a rule, however, such law is not applicable regarding foreign cultural property. The **cantonal authority in question** is responsible for answering this question (e.g. if the object is listed in the canton's registry of cultural property).

Further information on the current existing cantonal registers is also provided on the FOC page: https://www.bak.admin.ch/en/federal-registry-cantonal-registries

12. Are there special rules regarding cultural property from Iraq, Syria or Ukraine?

Yes, based on Art. 2 of the Federal Act of 22 March 2002 on the Implementation of International Sanctions (Embargo Act, SR 946.231), the Swiss Federal Council has issued three ordinances containing measures in relation to cultural property from these three countries:

Iraq

Article 1a of the Ordinance on Economic Measures against the Republic of Iraq dated 7 August 1990 (SR 946.206) states that:

- The following acts are prohibited: the import, export and transit as well as the sale, distribution, marketing, purchase and other form of transfer of Iraqi cultural property that was stolen, otherwise unaccounted for (without permission of the owner) or illicitly exported out of the Republic of Iraq after 2 August 1990.
- The illicit export of cultural property is presumed if there is documentation verifying that the property was located in the Republic of Iraq after 2 August 1990.

Syria

Article 9*a* of the Ordinance on Measures against Syria dated 08 June 2012 (SR 946.231.172.7) states that:

- The following acts are prohibited: the import, export and transit as well as the sale, distribution, marketing and purchase of Syrian cultural property as well as objects of archaeological, historical, cultural, religious or scholarly significance, in particular objects defined in Appendix 9, if just cause exists to assume that the objects:
  - were stolen or reported missing by the lawful owner;
  - illicitly exported from Syria, in particular, if the objects are listed in the inventories of public Syrian collections, Syrian museums, archives, libraries or religious institutions.
- This ban does not apply if the following can be proven:
  - the cultural property was exported from Syria before 15 March 2011;
  - the safe return of the cultural property to the legal owner in Syria can be guaranteed.

Ukraine

According to art. 14*e*^{bis} of the Ordinance of 4 March 2022 instituting measures in connection with the situation in Ukraine (SR 946.231.176.72):

- The purchase, import, transport, transit, sale, export and delivery of cultural property forming part of Ukraine's cultural heritage and other property of rare archaeological, historical, cultural, religious or scientific importance are prohibited if there are serious grounds for believing that such property has been stolen, that it has disappeared against the will of its rightful owner, or that it has been removed from Ukraine in violation of Ukrainian or international law.
- These bans do not apply:
  - to goods proven to have been exported from Ukraine before March 1, 2014; or
  - goods safely returned to their rightful owners in Ukraine.

13. Where can I find additional information about the customs requirements (forms etc.)?

Federal Office for Customs and Border Security (FOCBS)
Customs Information Office

Contact form: https://kontakt-formular.bazg.admin.ch/home
Phone: +41 58 467 15 15

www.bazg.admin.ch/en/ > Information for private individuals > Bans, restrictions and authorisations > Transfer of cultural property

14. Where can I learn more about CPTA?

Federal Office of Culture (FOC)
Specialised Body for the International Transfer of Cultural Property and Looted Art

Email: kgt@bak.admin.ch
Phone: +41 58 462 03 25

www.bak.admin.ch/kgt