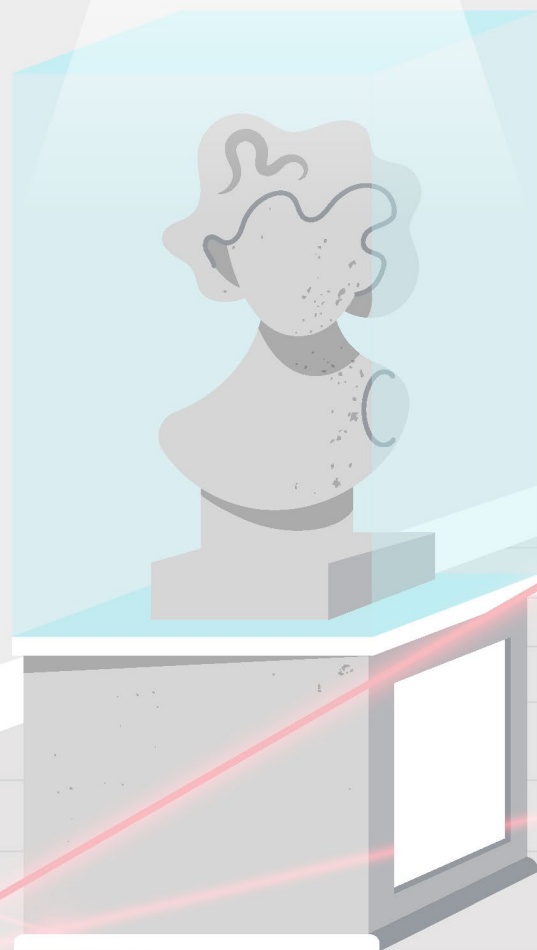


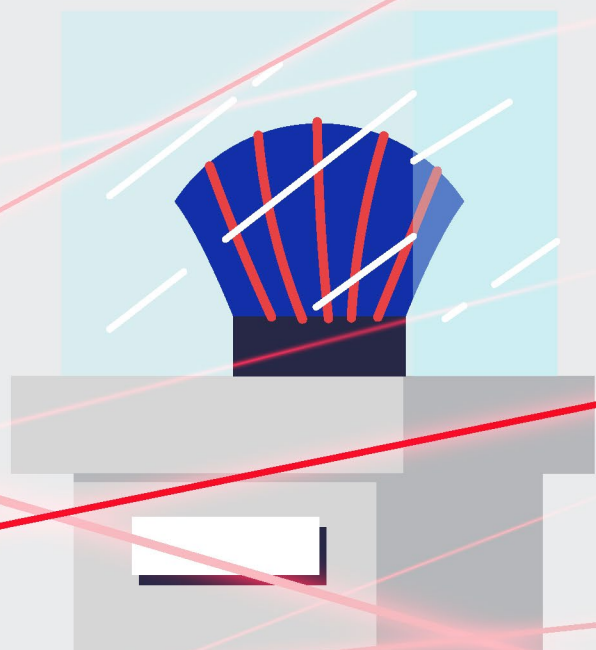


EUROPOL SPOTLIGHT

CHANGING TACTICS, CHANGING TARGETS: THE EVOLVING NATURE OF MUSEUM HEISTS

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Key findings



Museum thefts are becoming increasingly aggressive, with a shift towards violent and forceful methods. This may indicate the involvement of new criminal networks.



Offenders are increasingly targeting high-value items such as precious metals, gemstones and culturally significant artefacts.



The choice of targets suggests **strong criminal market demand and ease of illicit resale.**

Background

Thefts in museums are generally regarded as a non-violent form of organised property crime. Perpetrators rely on deception and stealth, using tactics like reconnaissance and discreet execution. This approach was evident, for instance, in the 2024 large-scale theft of valuable books from various libraries across the EU, where perpetrators acted discreetly, replacing originals with counterfeit copies to avoid detection¹.

However, recent reporting from Member States and ongoing investigations indicate a shift in both methods and targeting. Offenders are adopting more direct and confrontational approaches and focusing on specific categories of cultural artefacts.

Changing tactics: increasing use of violent means during targeted attacks

Recent cases reported by national authorities show a growing use of force during museum thefts. Offenders are breaching premises and display cases using tools such as sledgehammers, axes, crowbars and, in some instances, explosives.

CASE EXAMPLE

Dacian archaeological artefacts stolen following a blast at the museum's entrance

During the night of 24 to 25 January 2025, several Dacian archaeological artefacts, including the Golden Helmet of Coțofenești and three Dacian golden bracelets, were stolen from the **Dutch Drents Museum**, in Assen, the Netherlands. The perpetrators gained entry to the museum by detonating explosives at the door². The helmet and two of the three bracelets were recovered and recently returned to Romania³.

¹ Europol, 2024, 9 Georgian nationals arrested for stealing antique books, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/9-georgian-nationals-arrested-for-stealing-antique-books>

² Information contributed to Europol; Drents Museum, 2025, Archaeological masterpieces stolen from Drents Museum in Assen, accessible at <https://drentsmuseum.nl/en/news/closed-because-of-recent-events>; The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime, 2025, The theft of the golden Helmet of Cotofenesti: analysis and scenarios, accessible at <https://www.journalchc.com/2025/02/04/the-theft-of-the-gold-en-helmet-of-cotofenesti/>

³ Openbaar Ministerie, 2026, Geroofde Roemeense kunstschaten teruggegeven aan Roemenië (Stolen Romanian art treasures returned to Romania), accessible at <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuws/2026/04/02/geroofde-roemeense-kunstschaten-teruggegeven-aan-roemenie>

In some cases, offenders use firearms to intimidate security personnel and visitors. Some museum thefts have involved direct physical assaults on staff such as tying them up or using brute force against them.

CASE EXAMPLES

Violence during museum heists

In 2024, four hooded suspects, equipped with baseball bats and axes, stormed into the **Cognacq-Jay art museum in France**. They took seven gold and diamond-adorned objects, before fleeing the scene on scooters⁴.

The museum heist in October 2025 committed at the **Louvre Museum in Paris**, France, similarly exhibited violent features. To access the targeted artefacts, the thieves broke a window and threatened guards and visitors. They smashed the display cases in the Apollo Gallery, and stole jewellery worth an estimated EUR 88 million⁵.



Figure 1. The Louvre Museum in Paris, France. Source: Adobe Stock (ID 501413317)

Across reported cases, the use of force is closely linked to targeted operations, suggesting prior identification of specific objects and pre-planned execution.

⁴ Musée Cognacq-Jay, 2024, Reouverture (Reopening), accessible at <https://www.museecognacqjay.paris.fr/le-musee/ne-pas-manquer/reouverture>; Paris Musées, Ville de Paris, 2024, Braquage au musée Cognacq-Jay: liste des œuvres dérobées, accessible at https://www.museecognacqjay.paris.fr/sites/default/files/2024-11/communiqu%C3%A9_de_presse_-_braquage_au_mus%C3%A9e_cognacq-jay.pdf

⁵ Louvre Museum, 2025, Informations relatives au vol par effraction survenu ce dimanche 19 octobre au musée du Louvre (Information regarding the break-in that occurred this Sunday, October 19th, at the Louvre Museum), accessible at <https://presse.louvre.fr/informations-relatives-au-vol-par-effraction-survenu-ce-dimanche-19-octobre-au-musee-du-louvre/>

Changing targets: precious metals, gemstones and Chinese cultural artefacts

Alongside changing tactics, the targets of museum thefts have also evolved. Over the past two years, precious metals and stones have been frequently targeted. Most of these incidents involved some degree of violence. Thieves have stolen golden objects, such as nuggets, gold coins, golden decorative pieces as well as jewels with precious stones.

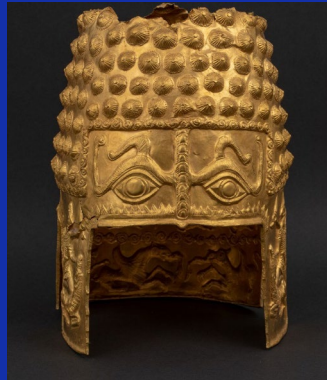


Figure 2. Coțofenești helmet, 450 BCE, National History Museum of Romania. (Photo: Ing. Marius Amarie) Source: <https://drentsmuseum.nl/en/news/closed-because-of-recent-events>



Figure 3. Dacian bracelet from Sarmizegetusa Regia, 50 BCE, National History Museum of Romania. (Photo: Ing. Marius Amarie). Source: <https://drentsmuseum.nl/en/news/closed-because-of-recent-events>

Another development concerns the targeting of Chinese cultural artefacts. These include Chinese porcelain plates from the 12th-13th centuries, jars originating from the Ming Dynasty, and Chinese bronze vases with coloured enamels dating from the Ming and Qing Dynasties.



Figure 4. One of the items stolen from the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. Porcelain vase, China, ca. 1680. Source: <https://www.princessehof.nl/over-het-museum/nieuws/2023/inbraak-in-keramiekmuseum-princessehof/objectlijst>



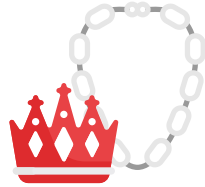
Figure 5. One of the items stolen from the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. Porcelain double gourd bottle, China, ca. 1500-1520. Source: <https://www.princessehof.nl/over-het-museum/nieuws/2023/inbraak-in-keramiekmuseum-princessehof/objectlijst>

All related cases reported so far exhibit targeted thefts and deliberate preparation, including prior reconnaissance and planning, rather than indiscriminate looting.

Drivers: financial value and market demand

Available intelligence suggests that target selection is primarily driven by financial considerations.

MAIN TARGETS:



PRECIOUS METALS

such as gold and silver.



JEWELLERY

decorated with precious stones.



CULTURAL ARTEFACTS

such as ancient Chinese porcelain artefacts.

Precious metals, such as gold and silver, and jewellery with precious stones have likely become preferred targets due to their increasing value. Precious metals can be easily melted down, leaving no trace for law enforcement, and facilitating illicit sales during the fencing process. Precious stones in jewellery, on the other hand, can be easily removed and sold further. Both types of items are attractive to criminal networks due to their visibility, accessibility, and the perception that museum security measures are less robust than those in jewellery stores⁶.

Similarly, ancient Chinese porcelain artefacts are likely targeted by cultural goods traffickers for financial gain. Driven by high demand⁷, they are likely to be easily sold on the art market.

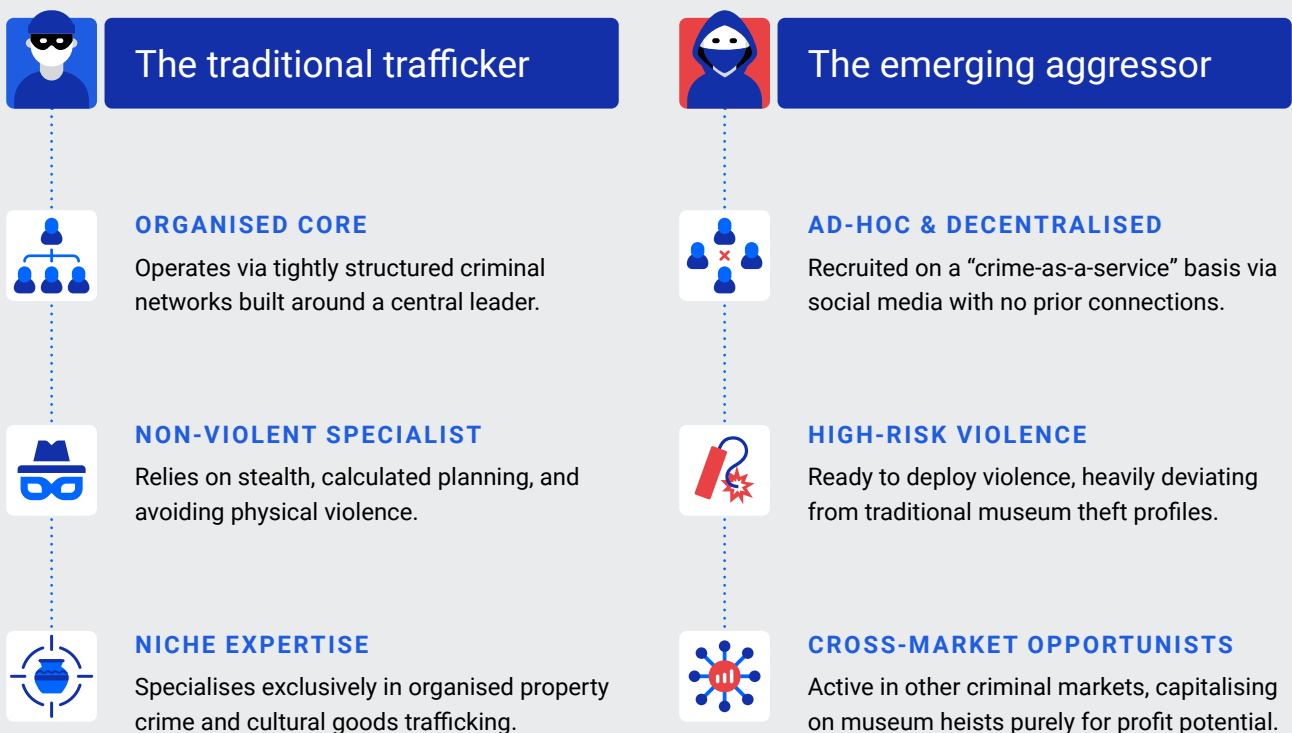
⁶ A study published by the European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) assesses that “museum security is always a balancing act between the advantages and disadvantages of different security measures. A museum also cannot have them all, if not for budgetary reasons, then because a museum is a (semi-) public space which, by definition, provides access to items of cultural heritage.” European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN), 2022, Preventing theft from museums: security and recovery measures, accessible at https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2208_MUSEUM%20THEFT_ENG_LR.pdf

⁷ Konvi, 2025, Investing in Ancient Chinese Artefacts: History, Value, and Market Trends, accessible at <https://konvi.app/magazine/article/investing-in-ancient-chinese-artefacts-history-value-and-market-trends/>

Perpetrators: indications of evolving actor profiles

The use of violent means could indicate the involvement of perpetrators with a new profile, distinct from those traditionally engaged in cultural property crimes. Unlike typical cultural goods traffickers, who usually avoid violence and specialise in organised property crime or the theft of cultural goods, these individuals often have histories of involvement in other types of crime. Additionally, some thieves apprehended in recent cases appear to coordinate their efforts on an ad-hoc basis, often recruited locally through social media and instant communication channels, without prior connections to each other. This differs from the usual structure of criminal networks involved in cultural goods trafficking, which typically operate in a core group organised around a leader.

There is still an intelligence gap, but it is possible that low-level executors of thefts are randomly recruited on a crime-as-a-service basis. Alternatively, some criminal actors and networks, typically active in other criminal markets, realised the low-risk, high-profit potential of museum heists.



Europol's response

Europol's European Serious and Organised Crime Centre (ESOCC) plays a pivotal role in supporting EU Member States and partners in combatting the illegal trade in cultural goods. Europol provides operational, analytical and coordination support, deploying experts on the ground to support investigations.

At the strategic level, Europol is uniquely positioned to offer an EU-wide perspective on the threats posed by these criminals by continuously monitoring operational developments, emerging trends and threats.

CASE EXAMPLE

Cultural goods trafficking network dismantled with the support of Europol's operational task force

In November 2025, Europol supported a coordinated operation involving law enforcement authorities from several EU Member States and cooperation partners. The joint effort led to the **dismantling of a criminal network** involved in **large-scale trafficking of cultural goods** across the EU and beyond. The criminal network was active in the trafficking of antique golden and silver coins and other antiquities. The operation was conducted under the framework of a Europol operational taskforce, which facilitated information exchange, coordination, and analytical support. The taskforce uncovered links between individuals based in different countries and helped locate additional artefacts suspected to have been trafficked by the criminal network. New spin-off investigations were also initiated in some of the countries taking part in the taskforce⁸.

8 Europol, 2025, 35 arrests in Bulgaria in a large art trafficking investigation, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/35-arrests-in-bulgaria-in-large-art-trafficking-investigation>



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