

Art in Times of War and Peace (Rome, 8–10 May 24)

Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome

Deadline: Dec 15, 2023

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Art in Times of War and Peace: Legacies of Early Modern Loot and Repair

A category of objects that exists entirely as a function of violence, the term ‘loot’ describes a relationship of possession, if not more specifically of dispossession. Neither an historically nor materially specific typology of artifacts, loot is instead primarily a legal category that cuts across place and time. And while it is also not an art- historical classification, it is one with which the discipline of art history must constantly contend, given its repercussions for what is accessible, where, and in what condition. This international, interdisciplinary conference invites papers addressing the ways in which conflict and its resolution have historically moved, modified, and reclassified art objects in the long early modern period. We invite contributions on the material, ethical, legal, political, and narrative implications of the claiming and reclaiming of objects in times of war and peace, as well as the ongoing resonance of these issues today, particularly for institutions that are their present-day repositories.

Studies on looting have a tendency to focus on canonical episodes, most often drawn from Roman, Napoleonic, and Nazi-era plunder. But the early modern period saw the steady transfer of booties, trophies, and spoils over the European continent and across the Atlantic and the Pacific. In Europe, this transfer triggered a moral, theological, and legal debate around property rights, as well as the development of codified criteria governing correct modes of wartime conduct, regulating who was permitted to plunder, what, when, and from whom. The act of looting was itself a strategy of violence, especially in the colonial context; but looted objects themselves were also particularly susceptible to damage, neglect, and even deliberate melting down. Moreover, although often thought of as an entirely modern phenomenon, the return of seized objects was also first theorized in this period as a tool of diplomacy and cultivated alongside a nascent legislation for the protection of art against damage, destruction, or unlawful export.

This conference revisits the early modern origins of the discourse around cultural property with an eye to the challenges facing museums today. Recently, scholarly meetings including “Plunder: An Alternative History of Art” (panel, Annual Meeting of the Association for Art History, 2022), and “The Material Cultures of War and Emergency” (conference, University College London and Oxford University, 2023) have brought attention to the long history of the taking away of things as a result of conflict. We hope to continue this conversation, expanding its purview beyond the object’s capture, to its framing, display, and possible restitution, while spotlighting medieval and Renaissance loot and its contemporary stakes.

This conference is organized by Julia Vázquez and Francesca Borgo. Following “Wastework” in 2023, this is the second yearly conference convened by the Lise Meitner Research Group “Decay, Loss, and Conservation in Art History” at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, furthering the Research Group’s ongoing inquiry into the consequences that different forms of loss, disappearance, and degradation bear for the discipline. For more information see our webpage: <https://www.biblhertz.it/research-group-borgo>. A series of special presentations and pre-conference visits to local collections will launch the event. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered for speakers. Proposals will be considered for inclusion in an edited volume on loot and its recovery in the early modern period. To submit a proposal, please send your CV (including current position and affiliation), a 250-word abstract and paper title to john.rattray@biblhertz.it by December 15, 2023.

Confirmed Keynote Speakers: Ananda Cohen-Aponte (Cornell University) and Erin Thompson (CUNY).

Reference:

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