Legacies: Why museum histories matter (Leiden, 13–15 Jan 26)

Leiden University, Jan 13–15, 2026
Deadline: Jun 15, 2025

Susanne Boersma

+++ New Deadline: 15.06.25 +++

The 21st century is a particularly engaging moment to study the history of museums. Due to pressing concerns about new ways to make old art accessible, global art, decolonization, and the social, ecological and political responsibilities of culture, museums are sustaining great periods of self-reflection and debate. One could argue
that museums are renewing their 18th-century Enlightenment origins as institutions of civility and hope, although these values are also undergoing reevaluation and change, in a global world.

Amidst such profound and urgent topics, what about the ideas of museums themselves? How do their storied origins – as private palace collections and Wunderkammern, houses of worship, monuments to the nation, sites of commemoration or new archistar containers for art – relate to their significance in contemporary life? How do their physical structures, be it cabinets, palaces, white cubes, temples, churches or mausolea, and their collections reflect the museums' histories, wherever they may be in the contemporary world? How do we navigate the idea of the museum as an inherited construct, within the context of its many debates? What is it about a museum's past that keeps us curious, and how does it inform what it does in the present?

This international conference invites papers that focus on museums with significant founding histories, broadly defined by their buildings, collections, commemorative functions, collectors or founders, that are currently engaged in some manner of institutional introspection, by way of exhibitions, acquisitions, restitutions, or renovations.
We invite papers that address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

MUSEUMS AND BUILDINGS
How does architecture shape a museum's legacy and/or how does legacy shape a museum's architecture?

MUSEUMS AND GEOPOLITICS
How do museums respond to war, vis-à-vis their collections, provenance, and national identities of the artists, whose work they exhibit or collect?

MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
As museums take on ownership of their pasts, what do they owe the visiting public, and what do visitors owe them?

MUSEUMS AND THEIR PASTS
How can a museum's history be reconstructed through its collections, exhibitions and building?

MUSEUM FOUNDERS AND THEIR LEGACIES
How do founders' stipulations inform contemporary museum practices?

MUSEUMS IN THE WORLD
How are the legacies of Western museums realized and/or revised across the globe?

Please submit your abstract (200 words) and author biography (100 words) to Dr. Susanne Boersma via s.w.boersma@hum.leidenuniv.nl by Sunday 15 June 2025. We welcome applications from the broadest range of researchers, scholars and museum professionals. No registration fee is required for participation in this conference, though travel costs and accommodation will be the responsibility of the participants.

You will be notified about the acceptance of your proposal by 15 July 2025.

This in-person conference is organized by Dr. Laurie Kalb Cosmo, Dr. Marika Keblusek, and Dr. Susanne Boersma, Leiden University Centre for Arts in Society.

Reference:
CFP: Legacies: Why museum histories matter (Leiden, 13-15 Jan 26). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 20, 2025 (accessed Nov 12, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/47287>.