

PRESS RELEASE
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New Exhibition: Loot. 10 Stories

Starting in spring 2024, the Humboldt Forum will be presenting the temporary exhibition *Loot. 10 Stories*. The exhibition was initiated and developed by the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague, where it also made its debut. Ten case studies explore the complex topic of looted art across three historical periods: the colonial era, the Napoleonic conquests of the early 19th century, and Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945. Each of the studied objects has its own story, which guest curators and creative directors Eline Jongsma and Kel O'Neill bring to life using the innovative format of virtual reality. Several of the selected exhibits come from Berlin collections – namely Stadtmuseum Berlin, the Ethnologisches Museum, and the Gipsformerei – and are representative of many other objects and their provenance.

Looting and plundering works of art and culturally significant objects has always been a symbolic demonstration of power: Napoleon strengthened his position by displaying looted art treasures at his Musée Napoleon. Hitler issued orders that artworks be confiscated for his planned museum. And in the context of their colonial exploitation and expansion, the European powers looted numerous cultural belongings from all over the world and had them shipped to Europe. All these objects share a history of unlawful seizure.

The exhibition *Loot. 10 Stories* illustrates the different aspects of looted art and its consequences. In ten case studies from three historical periods it explores the past as well as the future of unlawfully appropriated objects, touching on the topical issues of provenance research, restitution, and the way that museums view themselves today. Visitors are invited to reflect on the stories behind artefacts such as the horse's head from the quadriga sculpture on top of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, a self-portrait by

Rembrandt, an ornate wooden staff from Suriname, and replicas and moulds of the Benin Bronzes.

Hartmut Dorgerloh, General Director of the Humboldt Forum, commented: “More than 20,000 objects are on display in the exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, and the Stadtmuseum Berlin at the Humboldt Forum, with numerous other artefacts in storage depots. The question of how these artefacts were collected, acquired, or in some cases unlawfully appropriated, and how to handle them in a way that is in keeping with our times is a central theme for all Humboldt Forum’s institutions. After its huge success at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, we are delighted to be able to present the *Loot. 10 Stories* exhibition in Berlin. It is particularly important to make the various aspects of provenance research and restitution issues more visible.”

With the help of virtual reality installations, videos, and texts, visitors are offered a more direct experience of the stories behind the selected exhibits and encouraged to reflect on the questions at the heart of the exhibition: In what contexts were these objects looted? How did they end up in a museum? How do museums deal with looted and plundered art today? Both the design and the narrative of the exhibition are fundamental to the basic notion behind it: to offer visitors insights into potential approaches for dealing with looted art and restitution in the future. Moreover, it is about showing how returned objects can remain on display in museums. The exhibition also deals with objects that have already been returned to their rightful owners or for which the restitution process is ongoing, along with objects whose history cannot be fully reconstructed or whose legitimate owner cannot be located. There are also objects for which, despite intensive research, it has not yet been conclusively proven that they were unlawfully appropriated – as is the case with the Anet commode from Stadtmuseum Berlin.

Objects, artefacts, and cultural belongings in the exhibition

The exhibition includes three items on loan from the Stadtmuseum Berlin collection: the Märkisches Museum’s “Special Silver Inventory”, the Anet commode from the set of furniture known as the Reichsbank collection, and the horse’s head from the quadriga sculpture on the Brandenburg Gate. The Ethnologisches Museum – Staatliche Museen zu

Berlin provided an ornate wooden staff from Suriname and a Kris dagger from Bali, while the Gipsformerei – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin contributed replicas and moulds of the Benin Bronzes. Paintings by Rembrandt and Paulus Potter from the holdings of the Mauritshuis will also be on display, as well as a video about the creation of a 3D model of the Cannon of Kandy, an ornamental cannon inlaid with jewels that was kept in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum before being returned to Sri Lanka, and a painting by Jan Mijtens on loan from the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes.

Programme of events for the exhibition

“Ten among thousands”: the case studies presented in the exhibition are just a few among so many potential studies and object histories. The programme of events accompanying the exhibition therefore seeks to reveal the complexity of the topic and examines the various background perspectives and discourses on looted art. Among other events, there will be a day of public debate on 23 March 2024, the first weekend after the exhibition opens.

Onias Landveld, a Surinamese poet and member of the Ndyuka people, is among the invited guests. His topic is one of the key objects in the exhibition: a wooden staff in the shape of a female body (c. 1900) which was stolen from the Maroons in Suriname during the Dutch colonial period and then donated to Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum by a collector in 1903; for this reason it is still in the museum's possession today. Maroons are descended from escaped enslaved people of African origin.

One building, four partners: This diversity is founded on the collaboration of our partner institutions. The Humboldt Forum is a collaboration between the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss; the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz for collections from the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin for the Humboldt Lab; and the Stadtmuseum Berlin for the BERLIN GLOBAL exhibition.

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