

# The New York Times:-When Should a Museum Return Looted Items? It's Complicated- [C2]

Il museo Mauritshuis dell'Aia riunisce opere usurpate in epoche diverse, dal colonialismo olandese alle invasioni napoleoniche e alla Seconda guerra mondiale, in una mostra innovativa che, con l'aiuto della realtà virtuale, riflette sulla riparazione del saccheggio di opere d'arte.



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Some museums contain artworks that were [looted](#) by the Nazis during World War Two. Others have amassed collections of objects stolen by colonial powers. Yet others saw their own collections [plundered](#) as the [spoils of war](#). The Mauritshuis in The Hague has it all. Founded in the 17th century by a Dutch prince who governed a colony in what is now Brazil, the museum once held many so-called “ethnographic” objects in its “cabinet of curiosities.” During the Napoleonic era, the French army stole its entire painting collection. And the Mauritshuis still holds two dozen works identified as Nazi-[looted](#) art, for which [rightful](#) owners have not been found. “The whole history of the museum is very closely related to war [booty](#) and [looted](#) art,” said the Mauritshuis’s director, Martine Gosselink, which is why she decided to mount, “Loot: 10 Stories,” an exhibition [running through](#) Jan. 7, 2024, that explores the history of dubious museum acquisitions. “We want

to show that there's no [one-size-fits-all](#) solution," Gosselink said. "Every case has its own history, every object has its own biography, and every object needs its own approach." In a single room, the museum presents ten objects, or groups of objects, each of which is linked to a [nefarious](#) past. Two guest curators, Eline Jongsma and Kel O'Neill, have developed virtual reality presentations and short documentary films to help visitors inhabit the items' histories. Putting on a VR headset and looking at a Rembrandt self-portrait from 1669, for example, visitors virtually enter an Austrian salt mine, where Nazis hid stolen art during World War Two. The Rembrandt was taken in 1940 from the Rijksmuseum, where it had been [on loan](#) from a German-Jewish family. Hitler planned to hang it in a museum of his spoils, the Führermuseum. After the war, it was returned to the family and sold to the Mauritshuis. The Rembrandt restitution was a [clear-cut](#) case, O'Neill explained, but others have proven far more difficult. "There is a continuum," he said. "On the other end of the continuum, there are objects that have been [looted](#) that perhaps people don't want back." In one VR experience, visitors are taken into a recreation of a temple on the island of Bali, Indonesia, where a dead soldier is seen [clutching](#) an [ornate dagger](#), known as a 'kris'. It was stolen from an unknown warrior during a battle in 1849. Just two years later, a German collector gave the kris to the King of Prussia for his art chamber, which would later become part of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. Krisses are considered spiritual objects in Bali, the wall text at the Mauritshuis explains, but no one has [sought](#) the return of this object, perhaps because, taken out of its context, the kris has lost its meaning. Jongsma and O'Neill traveled to Bali earlier this year and presented the kris to King of Klungkung, Ida Dewa Agung Istri Kanya, but he didn't want it, because he didn't feel a connection to it. "That [blew away](#) some of my assumptions," O'Neill said. Important recent exhibitions at European museums have focused on colonial pillage, Napoleon's plunder and Nazi-[looted](#) art, but it is rare to see all three featured in a single show. Some experts in restitution questioned the idea of combining them, which could suggest the histories are equal. "You shouldn't mix them up in a great [melting pot](#)," said Gilbert Lupfer, the executive chairman of the German Lost Art Foundation. "For centuries, art was [looted](#) in times of crisis and times of war, and that's nothing new. But Nazi looting and Napoleonic looting are not

the same." When the Nazis [looted](#) art in Germany, it "was part of the Holocaust," he said. "That was not just a phenomenon of making money with art works from Jewish collections. It was part of the idea to destroy each form of Jewish life." The key to making such an exhibition work, Lupfer added, would be to provide adequate context around such specifics. Gosselink said while other shows went deeply into the context of each history, this show [aimed](#) to expose the differences. "The point is that these are not comparable," she said. "The one and only comparison to be made is that they're all [looted](#)." Arthur Brand, an independent Dutch detective who handles many cases of stolen art, said he thought that combining these histories was an innovative approach, because too often people take polarizing, extreme views on restitution. "Some say everything should go back, and then on the other hand there are people who say let's not give anything back," he said. "The Mauritshuis is trying to get everyone on board and get everyone involved in this topic, to see if there's a [middle path](#)."

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# Glossary

- **on loan** = in prestito
- **clear-cut** = palese
- **sought** = cercare
- **melting pot** = crogiolo
- **rightful** = legittimi
- **one-size-fits-all** = taglia unica (soluzione unica)
- **aimed** = aspirare
- **booty** = bottino
- **nefarious** = nefasto
- **blew away** = sorprendere
- **middle path** = via di mezzo
- **plundered** = spogliare
- **running through** = in corso fino
- **clutching** = afferrare
- **ornate dagger** = daga decorata
- **looted** = saccheggiare
- **spoils of war** = bottino di guerra