

## The masterpieces stolen by the Nazis

The journeys of **looted** artworks have powerful stories that are being explored in a new exhibition, writes Diane Cole.

**LOOT** (verb): to steal things from shops/stores or buildings after a **RIOT**, fire, etc.

More than 20 shops looted.

**RIOT** /'raɪət/ (noun): a situation in which a group of people behave in a violent way in a public place, often as a protest.

One prison guard was killed when a riot broke out in the jail.

Within the long history of art **resides** the **nearly-as-long** history of looted art.

**RESIDE** (verb): to live in a particular place

People who work in the city actually reside in neighbouring towns.

He returned to Britain in 1939, having resided abroad for many years.

We are **dazzled** *by* these treasures from faraway lands and ancient eras, even as we remain mostly **blind** to their **provenance**.

**DAZZLE** (verb): to impress sb with a particular amazing quality.  
He was dazzled *by* the warmth of her smile.

**BLIND** (adj.) ~ to sth: not noticing or realizing sth  
She is blind to her husband's faults.

**PROVENANCE** /'prɒvənəns/ (noun): origin  
There's no proof about the provenance of the painting (whether it is genuine(=real) or not).

Usually left unmentioned is their means of acquisition – all too often, brutally **uprooted** from their original homes and owners as **the spoils** of war, colonial conquest, or at the dictate of **despots**.

**UPROOT** (verb): to leave a place where you have lived for a long time.  
**We decided to uproot and head to Scotland.**

**THE SPOILS** (noun): goods taken from a place by thieves or by an army that has won the battle or war.

**DESPOT** /'despɒt/ (noun): a ruler with great power, especially one who uses it in a cruel way.

We're reading more than ever about international **disputes** over ownership and **restitution**, including **allegations** this week that Switzerland's largest art museum might be displaying up to 90 works with problematic provenances.

**DISPUTE** /'dɪspju:t/(noun): an argument or a disagreement between two people, groups or countries

The union is *in dispute with* management over working hours.

**RESTITUTION** (noun): the act of giving back sth that was lost or stolen to its owner.

**ALLEGATION** (noun): a public statement that is made without giving proof, accusing sb of doing sth that is wrong or illegal.

SYN: ACCUSATION

Also causing **controversy** recently are stories focusing on the origins – and the fate – of the *Benin Bronzes*, at least some of which are in the process of finding their way back to Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo from the many countries and museums to which their colonial rulers **dispersed** them, including Belgium, Germany, the British Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum.

**CONTROVERSY** (noun): public discussion and argument about sth that many people strongly disagree about, or are shocked by.

The design of the building has caused controversy

**DISPERSE** (verb): to move apart and go away in different directions.

The crowd dispersed quickly.

Such histories of theft and rescue are made more than real in a powerful new exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum, *Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art*. And they are presented through treasures both artistic and cultural.

**AFTERLIFE** (noun)

In the opening galleries, we view one extraordinary canvas after another by Pierre Bonnard, Marc Chagall, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Camille Pissarro and other great European modernist painters, each with a story to tell of **pillage** by the Nazi regime.

**PILLAGE** /pɪlɪdʒ/(verb): to steal things from the place or region, especially in a war, using violence.

Work of art were pillaged from churches and museums.

**REGIME** /reɪ'ʒi:m/



Many of these works were seized from collectors and artists who happened to be Jewish; others the Nazis **confiscated** and **slated** for **oblivion** because they did not conform to Hitler's narrow definition of what Aryan art should be

**CONFISCATE** (verb): to officially take sth away from sb, especially as a punishment.

Their land was confiscated after the war.

**SLATE** (verb): to criticize sb/sth

To slate a book/play/writer

**OBLIVION** (noun): a state in which you are not aware what is happening around you

– that is, representational and **wholesome** in their subject matter, as opposed to the often abstract, expressionistic compositions that characterised so many modernist works, which they labelled as "**degenerate**".

**WHOLESOME** (adj.): having a good moral influence

It was clean wholesome fun.

**DEGENERATE** (adj.): having moral standards that have fallen to a level that is very low and unacceptable to most people.

A degenerate popular culture

Then there are the beautiful arrays of delicately crafted **ritual** silver objects that once **graced** the homes and **synagogues** of the Jews of Europe. They can and should be admired for their craft.

**RITUAL** /'ritʃuəl/(adj.): done as a part of ceremony, especially a religious ceremony

Ritual chanting

**GRACE** (verb): to decorate sth

The table had once graced a duke's drawing room.

**SYNAGOGUES** /'sinəgɒg/ (noun): a building where Jews meet for religious worship and teaching

But in the context of this show, they also speak even more powerfully to their rough **seizure** from their original owners who once **wielded** them to welcome the Sabbath, celebrate the holidays, and observe the milestones of life and death, all according to Jewish tradition.

**SEIZURE** /'si:zə/(noun): the use of legal authority to take sth from sb  
The court ordered the seizure of his asset.

**WIELD** (verb): to use sth  
She was wielding a large knife.

You cannot walk through these galleries without thinking of the sense of **despoliation** experienced by so many people of other cultures throughout history. The emotional **pull** is **visceral**.

**DESPOIL** /dɪ'spɔɪl/(noun): to steal sth valuable from a place  
The church was despoiled of its marble wall covering.

**PULL** (noun): the fact of sth attracting you or having a strong effect on you

**VISCERAL** /'vɪcərəl/(adj.): resulting from strong feeling  
He had a visceral dislike of Europe.

These objects are the material survivors of the Jewish communities of Europe, each one with a distinct story, an "afterlife" of survival, to reveal.