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LOOT & REPAIR

Objects between the Early Modern Battlefield and the Modern-Day Museum

edited by Francesca Borgo and Julia Vázquez



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The Stuff of War: Toward a Material History of Loot and Repair for Early Modern Art

Francesca Borgo and Julia Vázquez



1. Theodor de Bry, *The Division of Spoils in the Darién* (detail), from *Americae pars quarta* (1594). Hand-colored engraving. Augsburg, Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg.

In the fourth volume of Theodor de Bry's *Americae*, one engraving stages the encounter between the Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa and Panquiaco, the son of a local *cacique* of the Darién region in 1513 (fig. 1).¹ De Bry distills the incident into a familiar constellation, the essential cast of most looting narratives: looters and looted, with the apparatus of capture and division, weapons and scales. But the real protagonist sits glaringly in the immediate foreground, ringed by the hemicycle of armed men who gesture toward it: a heap of loot of the most proverbial kind—a *montón*, in period parlance. Its centrality in the image signals its centrality in the enterprise: it is what matters, the motor that moves the action. As the heterogeneous jumble of the pile signals, more important than the individuality of each piece in the heap is its indiscriminate amassing, its weight.

Having presented Balboa with a large quantity of gold, Panquiaco watches as it is being weighed and the Spaniards quarrel over its division, swords at the ready. Their scramble draws his rebuke. He strikes the scales and scatters the spoils, astonished that such contention could arise over a material he regarded as trivial: gold and silver jewels, vessels, ornaments of all kinds. De Bry has converted the generic material indication provided by his source (“a certain amount of gold”) into objects, shaping the heap through a European grammar of metalwork.² Their forms read as a premonition of what Indigenous gold might become once appropriated and put to the service of its captors: raw material smelted, recast, and turned to new artistic

1. De Bry, *Americae pars quarta*, tav. XXI: *Indi cuiusdam gnomologia insignis de christianorum avaritia*. On Theodor de Bry's engravings, see Bucher, *Icon and Conquest*; Van Groesen, *Representations of the Overseas World*; Quilligan, “Theodore de Bry's Voyages.”

2. Benzoni, *La historia del mondo nuovo*, fol. 47r: “Havendo dato questo Cacique una certa somma d'oro, et vedendo come gli Spagnuoli nel dividerlo facevano quistione, diede una mano nelle bilancie, et tutto l'oro gettò per terra.”

ends—that is, what it might become as a result of its re-materialization, and its corresponding reclassification, from art to loot and back again.

In its anticipatory forms, the heap of seized metalware already gestures toward the future: What becomes of loot once seized? Set against the drama and high pitch of battle, the aftermath of capture is condemned to seem less eventful. But it is here that things slip away. They become difficult, if not impossible, to retrace and often no longer extant at all. The heap at the center of de Bry's image is the last moment in which they can still be seen, the hinge between capture and disappearance. To follow loot beyond this point, we must turn to other forms.

Buried in the *montón* is a set of scales, an essential distributive tool for apportioning the shares owed to those present and to the distant Spanish crown. Period chroniclers note that the quarrel erupted at this moment: when the *quinto real*—the royal fifth—was being set aside. The practice, one codified in *Las Siete Partidas* (ca. 1256–1265) under Alfonso X of Castile, required that a fifth of all movable goods taken in battle be claimed for the crown; the old provision was adapted from Islamic predatory law and is characteristic of the remarkable longevity of military codes: a thirteenth-century statute governing a sixteenth-century encounter. This persistence links episodes of captures otherwise far apart—conquistador forays in the Americas and corsair raids along the Maghrib coast—into a shared material script, each reenacting a division of spoils set down centuries earlier.³

Unlike the setting aside of spoils for royal gifts and rewards, wherein the aesthetic and symbolic value of objects was foregrounded, at stake in the *quinto real* is raw material worth: the scales declare that it is the precious matter of metalware that counts, not its value as artifact.⁴ This interplay of intrinsic and artistic value structures much of how loot operates; what is taken and how it is treated hinges on which form of value prevails. In moving objects across cultural lines and narratives, looting exposes value as a highly precarious and relative category: not only aesthetic hierarchies but even raw material worth is exposed as a convention—witness Panquiaco's indifference to the very gold that renders his land so desirable.⁵

3. *Las Siete Partidas*, title XXVI, laws IV and V, 476–477. On the *quinto real*, Mena García, *El oro del Darién*, 316–331. On the North African coast, see Coleman, “Of Corsairs.”

4. For an important distinction between the royal fifth and gifts, see Russo, “Cortés's Objects”; on smelting gold in Panama, see Mena García, *El oro del Darién*, 477–523.

5. On intrinsic value as convention, see De Munck, “Guilds.” For art history's own wrestling with the term, see Koerner and Rausing, “Value.”



2. Theodor de Bry, *The Division of Spoils in the Darién*, full view.

If metal objects were piled up in the Americas, they were eventually carted away to Spain in the form of bullion. In *De orbe novo* (1530), Peter Martyr d'Anghera writes that Panquiaco observed the Spaniards' smelting with a degree of shock: “You [. . .] destroy the artistic beauty of these necklaces, melting them into crude bars [*in rudes vectes conflare*].” Francisco López de Gómara, in his *Historia de las Indias* (1552), reprises the motif of the Indigenous astonishment at the undoing of finely wrought pieces to the near-formlessness of the ingot: “I am amazed at your blindness and folly, that you undo finely crafted jewels to make them into sticks [*palillos*].”⁶ Necklaces into ingots, crafted jewels into sticks. Meanwhile another conversion, the baptism of Panquiaco, unfolds in the right background (fig. 2).⁷

6. Martyr d'Anghera, *De orbe novo*, 1:220; López de Gómara, *Historia de las Indias*, 145–146: “Maravillóme de vuestra ceguera y locura, que deshacéis las joyas bien labradas por hacer dellas palillos.” Translation ours.

7. For the best account of liquidation in a colonial context, see Stielau, “Liquid Metaphors.”



3. Disc of bullion recovered from the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, sunk in 1622. Gold. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario.

As in-between objects that translated material from one system of signification into another, ingots from this period survive only accidentally. A round ingot from Panama was from the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, which sank off Key West in 1622 (fig. 3).⁸ The stamps with which it has been struck record how American art objects were made commensurable with Spanish taxonomies via a bureaucratic network of smelters (*fundidores*), assayers (*ensayadores*), weighers (*balanzarios*), and markers (*marcadores*).⁹ While four karat marks and three mint marks guarantee provenance and standards of purity, the larger six royal marks around the ingot's brim register that payment of the *quinto real*—the crown's mandated share of the loot—has been duly exacted.¹⁰ Every ingot is a ledger in disguise: extraction leaves behind its own kind of monument. As is often the case with loot, the form may dissolve, but the record of capture remains.

The archive that loot generates is both abundant and evasive: abundant in norms, inventories, auction lists, and legal quarrels yet evasive in the very places where art history most wants to find evidence—at the level of objecthood, integrity, stable attribution, or origin. The discipline's most durable habits sit uneasily with the spoils of war, which are routinely unmade and remade, gathered and dispersed by capture. Consequently, the histories of “the stuff of war” have tended to be written without objects.

8. On the Atocha shipwreck, see Cummins, “The Atocha's Silver.” On the notion of value in shipwrecks, see Van Kessel, “Stone Liquidities”; Hyman and Leibsohn, “Lost and Found,” 52.

9. Huber, *Beute und Conquista*, 274–275; Mena García, *El oro del Darién*, 490–491. For hallmarks, De Munck, “The Agency of Branding.” On currency and colonialism, see Edwards, *Money*.

10. The repeated stamps ensured that even sections sheared from the ingot indicated payment of the *quinto real*. See Christie's New York, *Gold and Silver*, lot 35–36, 79, 124.

Despite the centrality of material culture to conquest, the scant body of work that engages rigorously with premodern loot is centered in legal, economic, and military histories and has therefore tended to focus on the looting itself—actors, regulations, practices—rather than on the material culture implicated or the consequences for the circulation and displacement of specific works and their histories.¹¹ But even as plunder slips from art historical view, it continues to shape the material reality of works, altering their configuration, value, and meaning, displacing them spatially and juridically. It is in these effects—on form, value, display, and ownership—that loot emerges as a regime: a persistent ordering logic, simultaneously material, epistemological, and bureaucratic, through which objects newly articulate themselves before the historian's eye.

Law at swordpoint: Loot and return

Largely excluded from present-day debates, the early modern period is central to understanding how loot came to be defined in the West. Accompanied by a technical military revolution that expanded the scale, cost, and lengths of conflicts, war demanded increasing investments; such expenses had to be recovered, and plunder became the systematic instrument of that recovery. The period saw the steady transfer of booties, trophies, and spoils throughout the European continent as well as, for the first time, across the Atlantic and the Pacific. Back 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. To speak of loot in the early modern world is to enter a discourse expressed not only in the languages of seizure and violence but also in that of the law—of what could be taken and when, by whom, and from whom, and under what conditions it might be withheld or returned.¹²

The juxtaposition between the force of arms and the regulating action of the law was an antagonism sufficiently entrenched to invite parody. It finds

11. See the classic overviews of Redlich, *De praeda militari*; Contamine, “The Growth of State Control.” See also Hay, “Booty and Border Warfare”; Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe*, ch. 2; Krēsliņš, “War Booty”; Mattei and Nader, *Plunder*; Rondinini, “Jus ad bellum”; Inal, *Looting and Rape in Wartime*; Jucker, “Le butin de guerre.” Similar remarks are found in Deuchler, *Beute und Triumph*, XIX: “Beuten werden in der militär-geschichtlichen Literatur zwar erwähnt, doch als kultur-geschichtliche Phänomene und deren Folgen erhielten sie eine eher bescheidene Aufmerksamkeit.” See also notes 35 and 36.

12. Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate*; Vadi, “Warfare on Land,” 171–203, with extensive bibliography.



4. Circle of Pietro della Vecchia, *Ius in armis*, ca. 1650. Oil on canvas. Heidelberg, Kurpfälzisches Museum.

comedic form in a painting now attributed to Pietro della Vecchia (fig. 4).¹³ A soldier in arms has burst into a room of legal scholars and their pupils, who scramble to contain him: large books are propped up to hold back his advance, fingers point upwards, redirecting his impetus toward higher moral principles. It is left to the viewer to wonder how successfully, and for how long, this paper dam will hold.

The legibility of this tension owes much to a recent convergence between the histories of art and juridical practice. Concepts of law and normativity are currently gaining significant ground in scholarship of early modern visual and material culture, encouraged by postcolonial theory, theories of sovereignty and exception, and intercultural and transregional approaches.¹⁴ This volume works at that convergence, attending to the material sites where legal reasoning and acts of force meet. And nowhere does this happen more pointedly

than in the pressure of the soldier's sword against the word of the law in della Vecchia's painting. As his right hand forces the blade into the paper, we read its bright red inscription, *IUS IN ARMIS* (fig. 4). The expression intends to stigmatize the reality—or the temptation—that might determine right. It is famously taken up by Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, V, 12) to stress that Rome's conquests rested on the sheer force of arms. Among sixteenth-century jurists, the phrase appears polemically, to liken the territorial expansion of ancient Rome to its modern Holy Roman analogue unfolding across the Atlantic.¹⁵ *Ius in armis* serves as a rhetorical foil against which *ius in bello* emerges as a firmer juridical foundation governing the conduct of war.

It was the looting of the Americas that activated this regulating impulse. The scale and reach of resource extraction redirected early modern legal thought away from the question of war's legitimate causes (*ius ad bellum*) and toward the problem of its conduct (*ius in bello*). The encounter between Panquiaco and Balboa does not stand as a colonial aside appended to a European story but as an episode whose regulatory consequences reverberate back into Europe.¹⁶ That this juridical reckoning took shape most forcefully in Spain and found a first articulation in the work of the Dominican Francisco de Vitoria (ca. 1483–1546) is then no coincidence. In *De iure belli* (1539), Vitoria addressed whether Spain could legitimately wage war against Indigenous populations in the Americas and whether the taking of their property could be sustained within existing laws of war.¹⁷ His conclusions were contested, but the questions he posed on the nature of ownership and possession, and the legal status of what was taken in war, would set the terms of debate for the century that followed. What was emerging was not simply a legal debate but a regulatory infrastructure with material consequences. This juridical apparatus actively constituted loot as a category, classifying spoils, assigning value, and determining what could be taken and returned.

The ensuing literature on *ius in bello*—Pierino Belli (1563), Balthasar de Ayala (1582), Alberico Gentili (1588), and, finally, Hugo Grotius (1625)—has much to offer historians of material culture. These writers stand at the headwaters of an object economy in which the status changes that are traced in this volume are given juridical form. Read together, they mark the emergence

13. For contrasting readings of the image, see Aikema, *Pietro della Vecchia*, 139n156; Mulsow, *Knowledge Lost*, 196.

14. Mueller, Review of *Sacred Images and Normativity*; Behrmann, "Law"; Vismann, "Bildregime des Rechts." For an overview of legal iconography, see Huygebaert et al., *The Art of Law*.

15. Straumann, "*Ius erat in armis*," 605.

16. Rengger, "The Jus in Bello"; Haggemacher, "On the Doctrinal Origins"; Kolb, "Origin."

17. Douglas, *Modernity*, esp. 27–79; Koskenniemi, "Empire and International Law"; Fonseca, "The Colonization of American Nature."



5. Workshop of Pieter van Aelst after Raphael's design, *Paul Preaching at Athens* from the *Acts of the Apostles* series, 1517–1521. Tapestry. Vatican City, Musei Vaticani.

of a pan-European law of war that largely confined booty to enemy movable property captured on the battlefield, reserved sacking as a conditional right following a city's storming, and distinguished special categories of objects (arms and armor, sacred property). They even, and very carefully, regulated restitution via postliminy, the legal principle by which spoils captured by the enemy are restored to their former status upon recovery.

This returning vector of movement is present in premodernity, even if it is less favored by scholarship than the drama of translocation, which we are by now so adept at tracing. Restitution is present within the period's juridical frameworks (in legal treatises, peace settlements, and countless admiralty court

records), but also in the larger discursive and symbolic field.¹⁸ This is when the European “restitutive imaginary” first came into being as a remedial practice of restoration to a *status quo ante*—to the ownership, location, and material condition that would have existed had the violence not occurred.¹⁹ The different modes of recovery that were active in the period—post-conflict resolution, recapture, or confiscation—all share the fantasy of wiping out not simply the consequences of the capture but the very fact of its occurrence. Without attention to them, we risk missing the counter-vector by which objects tug toward prior loci, owners, and states and mistake loot's latent horizon as exclusively centrifugal.

Repair is often presented as a modern prerogative, thought to have lain dormant through history until the Congress of Vienna.²⁰ As a mode of historical narration, however, it never really ceased to exist. The normative frameworks that governed restitution in the early modern period extended well beyond the jurists surveyed above:

when statute did not lead, ancient exempla might. Episodes in which artworks are repatriated by generous military leaders abound in biblical and Greco-Roman history, from Cyrus the Great to Alexander or Augustus.²¹ Cicero's *Orations against Verres*—a foundational text on plunder—furnished



6. Tapestry border detail with Anne de Montmorency's arms and reparative inscriptions from 1553 and 1814. Vatican City, Musei Vaticani.

18. For peace treatises, see Lesaffer, “The Lore and Laws.” For admiralty court records, see Fieremans, “In Defence.”

19. Zolkos, *Restitution*; May, *After War Ends*, 181–200.

20. Arguing for a longer historical and comparative perspective, while avoiding anachronism: Koekkoek, “Rethinking the History of Reparations”; Savoy, 1815.

21. Lapatin, “The ‘Art’ of Politics”; Miles, *Art as Plunder*, 96–103.

a rhetorical vocabulary through which restitution could be claimed, narrated, and even inscribed onto the objects themselves. Seen through this moral repertoire of exemplary figures, repair practices familiar to modern-day readers emerge not as a modern invention but as a recurring gesture with deep roots. When, for example, the French constable Anne de Montmorency (1493–1567) retrieved two of Raphael’s tapestries that had famously been looted from the Sistine Chapel during the Sack of Rome and returned them to Pope Julius III in 1553–1554, he acted squarely within this tradition (fig. 5).

To be sure, the legal horizon is never far off. In describing Montmorency’s gift, an Italian cardinal would characterize Raphael’s tapestries as “quasi post liminio reversi,” a postliminy by proxy.²² But the restorer himself appears to have had a higher model in mind. Montmorency knowingly fashioned his gesture after Scipio Aemilianus, the Roman general who returned to Sicilian cities the artworks that the Carthaginians had looted from them. Cicero insists that the inscriptions Scipio added to these artworks upon their return are integral to the restorative action; these carefully crafted epigraphs even outlast the monuments themselves, which are soon re-looted by Verres.²³

Given that a French translation of the *Verrines* was dedicated to him, we can be certain Montmorency knew the source well.²⁴ He also understood the importance of inscribing his own presence onto the objects (fig. 6). In the commemorative inscriptions that he added together with his coat of arms on the tapestry borders, he adopted Cicero’s formula verbatim (“restituenda curavit,” *Verrines* 2.2.86).²⁵ Situating himself within a transhistorical canon of exemplary restorers who converted military prowess into magnanimity, Montmorency turned his restoration into a secondary capture, this time of moral capital. The restorer claims stewardship over the object’s restored status and, by extension, over the narrative of its displacement. The fantasy of undoing violence coexists with the visible trace of its redress. What

that redress entailed materially—the inscription and restoration undertaken before the tapestries reached Rome—we shall return to below.

Beyond the battlefield: Loot as regime

The legal frameworks examined above are not merely contexts for the study of loot. They are technical systems whose internal logics determined what spoils were worth, what could happen to them, and whether they could ever be returned. To read material culture through these frameworks is not to supplement art history with legal history but to recognize that the legal apparatus of plunder was itself a material force—one that classified, valued, and in some cases unmade the very things art history wishes to study. We call this force a regime.

As a mode of circulation and material transformation, loot temporarily subsumes a heterogeneous range of artifacts under a shared logic of capture. To take this seriously is to examine loot not only as an event but as a condition in the life of things, one that unfolds over time and leaves material traces that are neither incidental nor easily contained. Like actuarial logic in the domain of insurance, which adjudicates value under analogous conditions of risk and loss, the regime of loot is not a special case or a marginal phenomenon but a pervasive, conditioning force that shaped the lives of objects at a systemic level. It is a system with its own regulatory logic, bureaucratic apparatus, and material effects that persist well beyond the moment of seizure.²⁶

This is where art history still has unfinished business. We propose here to look closely at what follows after capture: all the material consequences that war introduces into the lives of these objects and the kinds of labor—bureaucratic, artistic, curatorial, reparative—required to manage and maintain them. It is at this expanded scale, from the early modern battlefield to the present-day museum, that loot comes into view as a regime. On that basis, we place it alongside the *relic*, the *souvenir*, and *spolia*—categories that partially overlap with the kind of military spoils that interest us here. We invite loot to take its seat at the table of these conceptually hard-working disciplinary notions, as a mode of objecthood whose historical traction unfurls well after seizure, in its reframing, rework, and return.

26. See Hunter and Moss, “Art and the Actuarial Imagination,” who propose insurance as one of art history’s co-constitutive forces. Our use of regime for loot proceeds from an analogous conviction.

22. Shearman, *Raphael*, 1026–1027.

23. See *Verrines*, esp. 2.2.86–87; 2.4.73–74, 79–82; Miles, *Art as Plunder*, 96–103; Butler, *The Hand of Cicero*, 48–51.

24. Saulnier, “Quel poète pour le Grand-Maitre?” 391.

25. Shearman, *Raphael*, 1521: “URBE CAPTA PARTEM AULAEORUM/ A PRAEDONIB[US] DISTRACTORUM CO/NQUISITAMANNAS MOMMORAN/CIUS GALLICAE MILITIAE PRAEF[ECTUS]/ RESARCIENDAM ATQ[UE] IULIO III P[ONTIFICI]/ M[AXIMO] RESTITUENDAM CURAVIT 1553.” Montmorency’s inscription must have been originally included on the borders of both returned tapestries, *Paul Preaching at Athens* and *The Conversion of Saul*. While the one affixed to *Paul Preaching at Athens* is visible only in old photographs, the other, reproduced here, was replaced with a copy in 1814. On both tapestries, see De Strobel et al., *Leo X and Raphael*, vol. 2, pt. 7 and pt. 10, and further on for a closer reading.

We argue that loot became increasingly salient as a regime in the sixteenth century, when the possibility of capture came to structure how things were created, understood and managed—even when not themselves seized. This is when looting came into conceptual clarity as a legal designation, geographic event, and narrative device. The semantic career of *spolia*—literally, what is stripped from the enemy—registers this crystallization precisely. It was in the sixteenth century that Italian antiquarians and artists started applying a term that had thus far been reserved for the trophies of war more generically to ancient fragments reused in later architectural contexts. It is in Raphael's 1519 letter to Pope Leo X, when he discusses the second-century reliefs incorporated into the fourth-century Arch of Constantine, that we see *spolia* shifting from a military lexicon to an art historical one.²⁷ That migration reveals the moment at which the logic of seizure had become so pervasive that it furnished a metaphor for how objects circulate, even outside the battlefield.

However broadly *spolia* may since have been applied, the term always smuggles in some interpretative baggage, as though reuse were always already a program of domination. The practice of spoliation is grounded on extraction and removal, not just citation; it requires a material wresting from the site of origin that unavoidably impoverishes it. If the military metaphor of *spolia* has thrived so successfully for centuries, we should ask whether the violence of its bellicose origins might be present in the history of European art beyond a strictly military context.²⁸

With *spolia*, art history gave to the spoils of war a second life and an ever-expanding definition.²⁹ While in its derivative, art historical meaning in use since the Renaissance, *spolia* points vaguely to an elsewhere, an indeterminate origin (often just “pagan antiquity”), looted *spolia* or spoils, together with their sacred counterpart, the relic, maintain a record of more precise provenance.³⁰ And even though nomenclative ambition might tempt us to neatly distinguish *spolia* and spoils, objects quietly overrule the distinction; there is considerable movement across both categories, as records of provenance and origin are lost, reconstructed a posteriori, invented, and attached to fragments. When the obelisk now in Piazza Navona in Rome was re-erected as part of Bernini's *Four*

Rivers Fountain in 1651, for example, new Latin inscriptions grafted onto it a false history of conquest, identifying it as a trophy brought to Rome by Caracalla after his Egyptian military expedition.³¹ *Spolia* from antiquity, objects that had never crossed enemy lines, were commonly enlisted as spoils retrospectively.

Like the obelisk, architectural *spolia* and immured sediments in particular invite continuous *misinterpretation*. By virtue of their public display, they remain open to local storytelling traditions that need only the recognition of a foreign origin to spin fresh narratives. Is it plunder or trade, commodity or trophy? If *spolia* have an affordance, it is to project victory even when victory is absent, to retrofit conquest onto assemblages that might not result from military conquest.³²

The early modern period holds a special, if underexamined, distinction within the long history of loot. Sweeping historical overviews of plunder tend to pick up momentum only from Lord Elgin onward, and a now substantial body of work—far too large to summarize here—addresses the dislocation of artworks in the wake of Napoleonic, nineteenth-century, and Nazi-era plunder.³³ For modernity, the centrality of material culture to conquest has been explored productively, even anthropologically and archaeologically.³⁴

By contrast, material histories of pre-Napoleonic plunder are rare.³⁵ Early modern wars are predominantly told as legal, economic, and military histories. This literature tends to gravitate toward the drama of seizure and rehearse the logic staged by de Bry: objects matter as shares and enter the tallies of conquest indiscriminately, alongside cattle, crops, and prisoners.³⁶ Even when these accounts gesture toward material histories, they rely on

31. Iversen, *Obelisks*, 92; Ciampini, *Gli obelischi*, 159–167.

32. De Divitiis, “A Local Sense”; Matthews, *Conflict*.

33. Lindsay, *History of Loot*; Grant, *A Pillage of Art*; Treue, *Art Plunder*; Chamberlin, *Loot! A diachronic approach* is also in Dolezalek, Savoy, and Skwirblies, *Beute: Eine Anthologie zu Kunstraub und Kulturerbe* and the accompanying Lagatz, Savoy, and Sissis, *Beute: Ein Bildatlas zu Kunstraub und Kulturerbe*.

34. Talbot Rice and Harding, *Butterflies & Bayonets*; Saunders, *Matters of Conflict*; Auslander and Zahra, *Objects of War*; Finn and Hacker, *Materializing the Military*; Saunders and Cornish, *Contested Objects*; Lidchi and Allan, *Dividing the Spoils*; Beck, Johnson and Schofield, *Matériel Culture*.

35. Deuchler, *Beute und Triumph*; Matthews, *Conflict*; Nestor, *War-Booty*; Wolf, *Beute, Kunst, Transfers*; Urquizar Herrera, “Islamic Objects”; Sjökvist, *Looted Libraries*; Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire*. More tangentially: Loffredo, “A Captive History”; Chastel, *The Sack of Rome*; Hanß, *Materielle Kultur*. Recently, however: Van Kessel, “Invisible Loot”; and the new series *Raub und Ruhm: Erbeutes Erbe im Museum* published by Vexer and edited by Beate Fricke.

36. Groebner, Guex, and Tanner, *Kriegswirtschaft und Wirtschaftskriege*; Huber, *Beute und Conquista*; Jucker, “Objektraub”; Hay, “Booty and Border”; Redlich, *De praeda militari*; Contamine, “The Growth of State Control”; Krēsliņš, “War Booty.”

27. Uytterhoeven, “*Spolia*, -iorum.” On the arch, see Elsner, “From the Culture of *spolia*.”

28. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 179.

29. For the tension between the original military meaning and its application in *spolia* studies, see Greenhalgh, “*Spolia*”; Kinney, “The Concept of *Spolia*.” A more recent critical take on the blanket notion of *spolia* is in Bergmeier, “The Pastiche Past.”

30. For this distinction, see Liverani, “Reading *Spolia*.”

chronicles and battle accounts, articles of war, and peace treaties—sources that are frustratingly generic for anyone interested in objects—often reducing booty to material and quantity alone. Existing scholarship has seldom pressed the material questions that follow from capture.

As a condition in the life of things rather than a material category, loot encompasses a heterogeneous array of stuff. The striking material uniformity of de Bry's *montón*, composed solely of gleaming gold, is all the more conspicuous when set against the mixed and unruly piles that characterize European scenes of sack. In the pages that follow, this regime gathers up manuscripts and sculptural fragments, field tents, banners, bells, vessels, furnishings, relics, and jewels. What these objects share is not material, function, or origin; it is the fact of capture that reclassifies them, temporarily suspending their prior identities and imposing a new ordering logic that cuts across previous taxonomies. But capture does more than reclassify.

The product of violence rather than artifice, loot is equally an art of transformation, and one that can take many forms besides the melting down anticipated by the events depicted in de Bry's image. The material destinies that war sets in motion are markedly divergent, unfolding along a spectrum that ranges from obliteration to salvage, from iconoclasm to preservation in the form of trophy. In between lies a wide repertoire of manipulations far more complex than straightforward dislocation: it includes inscription, fragmentation, defacement, remediation, replication, or repair.³⁷ We organize these operations around three distinct material regimes—liquidation, inscription, and repair—each of which names a distinct logic through which objects are processed, reclassified, and either destroyed or preserved.

Each of them operates on form and provenance, and above all on value—reducing it to raw material worth via liquidation, producing it through narrative via inscription, or restoring it through repair. Value is made, unmade, or remade by the regime. Each generates its own archive and mobilizes specialized labor—bureaucratic, artisanal, curatorial—that remains largely invisible in traditional accounts. And each produces its own form of disappearance: liquidation makes the object vanish into coin; inscription subsumes its former life under the narrative of seizure; repair effaces the capture itself. What becomes of objects once the regime takes hold is the subject of what follows.

Material regime / 1: Liquidation

Unstuck from their place and time, unattributed or unidentified, often heavily altered, fragmented, or non-extant, the spoils of war sit awkwardly on the scales by which art history prefers to weigh its objects. They defy many of the discipline's conventional biases: presence, legibility, integrity, authorship, aesthetic value. As in Panquiac's episode, for every ingot cast, a necklace is melted down. Yet irrespective of the final shape for which our Spanish gold ingot is destined, and however loosely manufactured, we take it as an object of inquiry alongside scholars who have shown that loss—of form, original condition, or the object itself—need not be the *terminus ante quem* of art historical work.

The early modern record of liquidation is abundant: objects melted down, others recast. At a small scale, these processes link ingots to siege coins, reliquaries, and goldsmiths' works; at their most monumental scale, they connect cannons, bells, and large-scale sculptures, activating what Allison Stielau and Ittai Weinryb have termed the “metallic provenance” and “hereditary code” of bronze.³⁸ Examples from the theater of European wars abound: from the cannon *La Giulia*, once Michelangelo's statue of *Julius II* in Bologna (1508), to the monuments of the Duke of Alba in Antwerp (1570–1571), Napoleon in Place Vendôme (1808), or Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square (1840–1843), even the Florentine bronzes of Giambologna and Pietro Tacca.³⁹

These sculptors could privately lament the poor quality of the artillery stock “from the port of Livorno” made available to them while publicly proclaiming the origin of their material *ex aere capto*. But the claim that they were cast from Ottoman cannons captured in naval battle did not need to be materially verifiable to be operative. On the equestrian monument of Ferdinando I de' Medici, an inscription across the saddle girth—“De metalli rapiti al fero trace” (made of metals taken from the fierce Thracians)—was composed by the poet Giovanni Villifranchi (1570–1614) at the Grand Duke's personal request. Ferdinando had called for proposals to express the bronze's looted provenance with words that had to be “few and clear” and that would be read easily “di sotto in su,” as they indeed still are, under the horse's belly (figs. 7–8). Some suggest the inscription may also have

37. On material alteration as a key practice of military collecting, see the introduction of Lidchi and Allan, *Dividing the Spoils*; Lidchi and Hartwell, *Colonial Collections*.

38. Stielau, “‘Adding to the Good Silver,’” 160; Weinryb, *The Bronze Object*, 3.

39. On the phenomenon at large, see Bass, *The Monument's End*, 21–28; Cole, “Under the Sign of Vulcan.”



7. Giambologna and Pietro Tacca, Equestrian Monument of Ferdinando I de' Medici, 1603–1608. Bronze. Florence, Piazza della Santissima Annunziata.

been added after casting, following the capture and plundering of the North African city of Bona, today's Annaba, in September 1607.⁴⁰

Not all liquidation left such legible traces. Loot could vanish swiftly: melted down into metal or converted through sale into coin—in both cases, liquidated. After an organized procedure of appraisals and public auction, preferably held on site, booty rapidly transformed into prize money.⁴¹ Captives were subject to the same logic; they, too, were liquidated into ransom revenues. These sums could fluctuate dramatically: in 1527, Pope Clement VII could command a ransom of 400,000 ducats, while a cardinal fetched a mere 5,000;

40. See Erben, “Die Reiterdenkmäler der Medici”; Baldinucci, *Notizie*, 2:577. We thank Nicola Salvioli for his technical expertise on Giambologna's bronze alloys and casting techniques.

41. *Las Siete Partidas*, pt. 2, title XXVI, law XXXI–XXXIV, 495–498, for a careful disciplining of prize auctions.

8. Detail of fig. 7, with inscription.



if the same amount could be extracted from an ambassador, then his secretary yielded only 150; a young nobleman might pay 200, but an entire noble palace 10,000—prices, as ever, determined by the market.⁴²

For contemporaries, liquidating assets—objects and captives alike—made practical sense on multiple counts: it made loot easier to carry and produced positive cascading effects within the wider economy. But, crucially, liquidating loot also rendered the objects themselves impossible to return. Once converted into coin, they were effectively laundered, anachronistic though the term may be. The advantages of such a process were not lost on contemporaries: Hugo Grotius argued very explicitly in *De iure praedae* (1604–1606) for the monetization of spoils and against their treasuring up and display, which he considered decadent, and negatively associated with the Spanish

42. Ransom amounts for Clement VII, Cardinal Piccolomini, Domenico Venier, and Luca dei Massimi are in Hook, *The Sack*, 165, 169, 170–171.



9. Workshop of Jean Baudouin after Giulio Romano's design, *The Pay of the Soldiers* (detail) from the *Fructus Belli* series, 1544–1545. Tapestry. Ecoen, Musée National de la Renaissance.

and Portuguese. But as Grotius himself reasoned, monetization was also preemptively anti-restitutive: spoils already consumed through sale could not practicably be restored—the buyer's good faith shielded them—placing loot beyond the grasp of any claimant.⁴³

To think of loot as *booty*, then, is to shift from the individual, disorderly, and predatory action of capture to the collective, bureaucratic, and hierarchical distribution that, however ridden with quarrels and irregularities, ultimately reaffirmed the army's established social order. If liquidation dissolved the object, the cash it yielded had to be apportioned out in turn, and it is here that loot enters the second stage of its choreography: pay. A scene from a set of tapestries designed and woven for Ferrante Gonzaga (1507–1557) during his tenure as commander-in-chief of Spanish imperial troops shows a line of soldiers waiting their turn to loosen the strings of the purse with one hand and grab



10. Hans Weiditz, *The Pay of the Soldiers*, from Petrarch's *De remediis*. Woodcut. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie.

a handful of coins with the other. Money is the protagonist here, amassed in the same sacks and heaps as the loot from which it derives. It shares the tabletop with the instruments of secretarial diligence: writing implements, account books, and muster rolls that speak to the paperwork of loot (fig. 9).⁴⁴ Coin and ledger occupy the same surface, as if to acknowledge that the soldier's wage and the scribe's entry are two faces of a single operation.

North of the Alps, the scene shifts little when the *Landsknechte* receive their pay (fig. 10). In Hans Weiditz's woodcut for the 1532 German translation of Petrarch's *De remediis*, we see the same choreography of papers, purses, hands, and coin, though stripped of idealized classicizing tones and rendered with a more forthright acknowledgment that these monies are distilled from plunder: "I have a great treasure, many tons of gold amassed together, so that I can pay my soldiers well and keep them grateful."⁴⁵ The boastful caption expands

44. Brown, *Tapestries*, 158–173. We thank Guido Rebecchini for bringing the series to our attention.

45. Petrarca, *Von der Artzeney bayden Glück*, C, fol. 119v. On scenes of soldier's muster and pay, see

43. Van Kessel, "Invisible Loot."



12. European broadsword with a dedicatory inscription to the armory of Alexandria, 1419. Steel and wood. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



13. Leather box for the pennant of Francis I captured at Pavia in 1525. Molded and incised leather, glass cameos, partially gilded and enameled silver, paper. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum.

yield such sharply opposite material outcomes. The regime of loot not only stripped value from spoils; it could also produce it, by firming up the object's provenance. Of the legendary quantities of Burgundian silverware looted at Grandson, Murten, and Nancy in 1476–1477 by Swiss confederates, the overwhelming majority was melted down, but a small number of pieces were brought back from the battlefield and marked along rim or base with the circumstances of their taking, the names of the Swiss soldiers who received them as reward, and the indication of their new repository.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, too, artworks could be dismantled to wrench out precious materials or inscribed to memorialize their seizure. During the Sack of Rome in 1527, lead was stripped from papal bulls and stained glass windows to be melted into bullets; golden threads were pulled from tapestries. In such cases, transformation worked through extraction. But captured objects were also marked:

49. For example, Deuchler, *Die Burgunderbeute*, 139–140, 155–157, and the inscription on the looted silver bowl now in Liestal: “Heinrich Strübin gon Lieschstal bracht/ Dise Schalen us Nanse Schlacht/ Flucht, Hochmuth, Fortch Gott, sins Worts Acht/ Im 1477 jar es geschach.” Also Pfister, *Histoire de Nancy*, 1:705.

inscriptions were carved into marble fragments, penned into the pages of stolen manuscripts, or woven into the borders of tapestries.⁵⁰

Easily overlooked are the connections between these forms of material transformation and military practices of collecting. Memorializing the circumstances of acquisition by deliberately altering the artifact is central to military collecting and remains clearly legible in the holdings of today's war and army museums across Europe. Looted arms and armor, from blades to cannons, are commonly marked with inscriptions of deposit into the new arsenal; swords in particular are highly palimpsestic objects, with hilts and blades variously modified, repaired, and reinscribed as they pass through enemy lines; concepts of authenticity and integrity of form are misplaced expectations in this context. A European broadsword now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, carries an Arabic inscription that

50. For examples, see the contributions by Guido Rebecchini and Jessica Goethals in this volume.

tells us more about its capture than about its making (fig. 12). Recording its accession into the armory of Alexandria in 1419 by the Mamluk sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (r. 1412–1421), the inscription marks the sword as one of a large collection of Christian arms taken as booty in the Aegean, possibly Cyprus.⁵¹ Whereas some trophies bear their history inscribed on the surface, others were marked through reframing. The blue silk pennant of French king Francis I, for example, was set into a secular reliquary, an ad hoc leather box inscribed with the exact date and circumstances of its capture at the Battle of Pavia in 1525 (fig. 13).⁵² Perhaps the most striking entries in this archive of looting inscriptions are those added by late seventeenth-century German scholars to a group of Qur'ans captured during the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683; their handwritten annotations relish the gruesome provenance of the manuscripts and intimate that they bore traces of blood.⁵³

Such acts of marking and framing rivet loot to the moment of seizure. This “economy of enrichment” that produces nothing new but augments existing things by attaching narratives to them is typical of plunder.⁵⁴ What distinguishes these practices from other forms of reframing, reworking, and reuse carried out outside the military context is that they do not obliterate the memory of a former state but instead seek to consolidate it. It is not a *damnatio memoriae* of the vanquished; indeed, it cannot be, because the unmoored fragment must not cease to be legible as spoil or it will lose its value and status. Essential to its semiotic efficacy as loot is that it never fully blends into the new context, never fully naturalizes: even as it moves along, displaced and unmoored, it must remain bound to an elsewhere, to a former owner and their defeat. This inscribing, recording, narrating, memorializing, and marking, this drawing up of inventories that continuously happens around loot—standards slowly falling apart or metalware threatening liquidation—registers worries about a possible loss of origin and becomes especially important when the object is intrinsically worthless. The right leather

14. Trophy of arms of Elector John Frederick of Saxony from the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547. Madrid, Real Armería.



boot worn by the Elector of Saxony at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547, seized as a trophy by the victorious imperial forces and carried to Madrid's Real Armería, is nothing without its object label. With it, it is a witness to Charles V's victory on the battlefield (fig. 14).

In its dependence on a record of origin to sustain its value, loot operates within a martial discourse much as the relic does within an ecclesiastical one. The categories of relic and loot intersect in more ways than one. They converge even at the threshold of their repository, as spoils could be accessioned into a church's nave as readily as into an armory's hall; Turkish banners captured at Lepanto in 1571 survive in both settings.⁵⁵ Most importantly, in order to remain operative, both relics and spoils need to maintain a record of origin. As with Frederick of Saxony's boot, it is necessary to record that a sliver of wood came from the True Cross to stop it from regressing into a wood chip. And yet, a categorical distinction exists between them: while relics, once enshrined or immured, are discouraged from further circulation,

51. “Donation of al-Mālik al-Mu'ayyad Abū al-Nasr Shaykh to the armory in the frontier city of Alexandria [in the] year 822 [1419 CE].” On arsenal marks, Pyhrr, “European Armor.” In the epic tradition, see Ott, “Text-Bearing Warriors”; Kalus, “Donations pieuses,” 40–41.

52. “Don Juan Lopez Quixada, doctor of canon law and choir master, won the standard that lies here and these very saint relics when the King of France lost the Battle of Pavia and was made prisoner by the Spaniards the 25th of February of the year 1525.” See Gagné and McCall, *Fabric of War*, 4.

53. Babinski and Loop, “Looting and Learning,” 265–267. We thank Alfie Robinson for the reference.

54. For example, for the Benin bronzes, Bodenstein, “Notes for a Long-Term Approach”; Howald, “The Power of Provenance”; Hevia, “Plunder, Markets, and Museums.”

55. Nelson, “Relics of Christian Victory”; Urquizar Herrera, “Islamic Objects.” On military relics, see Hooper, “A Cross-Cultural Theory”; Cornish, “Sacred Relics.”

time and again we find that, once unmoored, spoils have a tendency to move backward, toward their points of origin.⁵⁶

Nomadic objects in religious settings tend toward emplacement and ritual containment; loot, by contrast, remains tethered elsewhere and keeps pulling backward toward that point even as it circulates onward.⁵⁷ To be sure, spoils can be stabilized as relics, and relics are remobilized when looted; the 1527 Sack of Rome furnishes abundant examples of both.⁵⁸ But while relics move *toward* a destination, even if in stages, and their transfer is legitimated through miracle narratives and divine consent, loot moves *through* and *backward*. Its presence is made lawful only by the contingencies of power, and it remains virtually alienable because, for as long as it remains operative as loot, it will also continue to register as alien to its new setting.

Material regime / 3: Repair

If the capture of Francis I's pennant is memorialized in a leather box, and a Christian sword bears its seizure inscribed in Arabic along the blade, not all histories of capture leave traces. When the backward pull of loot has run its full course and the object is reinstated in its original location, with no signs of past injuries or blemishes, the history of its displacement may be invisible. Nothing about Michelangelo's *Bacchus* (fig. 15)—its reception, condition, location, monumentality—has ever given scholars any hint of its violent history of displacement. Yet as Diletta Gamberini has recently uncovered, the sculpture was seized from Jacopo Galli's Roman collection by Spanish soldiers during the Sack of 1527, carried to the docks at Ripa Grande, and loaded onto a ship bound for Naples.⁵⁹ The vessel was sunk in a raid before reaching Ostia, and the *Bacchus* was returned to the Galli gardens—*com'era, dov'era*.

Such presentation of deliberately unaltered works of art in their exact previous location is a formal gesture that works to legitimize a master narrative of continuity and conservation: a history in which the army never laid siege, the spoils never taken. One might ask how the restituted artworks of

the present will hold their histories of capture in view, centuries from now, or whether these, too, will be subsumed into narratives that paper over the violence of their removal. Which records will adhere and which will fade with the passage of time depends, in the end, on whether return is understood as ending or beginning.⁶⁰

Return is the latent horizon of loot. By virtue of the memorialization of its former setting, this backward pull remains active across extended chronologies. In early modern discourse, return is imagined not merely as a re-placing (*re-statuere*) but as a restoration of possession, location, and—at its most ambitious—condition. In the Scholastic tradition, restitution carries a moral force that exceeds the balancing of accounts. Building on Augustine and Aquinas, it becomes a condition for the remission of sins; the salvation of the wrongdoer's soul is imperiled so long as restoration is not performed by means of restitution.⁶¹

Early modern archives register this pressure in concrete, object-bound ways. In the wake of the Sack of 1527—when military authorities famously failed to regulate a large part of the imperial looting—remorseful Spanish soldiers returned small golden chains and rings by depositing them in the Spanish national church in Rome, to be restored to their former owners (“*que deberunt restitui suis dominis*”).⁶² Others carried their loot a short distance further. In Cagliari, a port of call on the return route to Spain, further spoils were relinquished, among them a winged Flemish portable altarpiece removed from Clement VII's private apartment in the Apostolic Palace. The spoils' anticipated backward trajectory is articulated with clarity in the archival records: spoils were to be returned to the place from where they had been taken (“*tornarles de hon les havien tretes*”), and exactly to the same churches (“*suis prioribus ecclesiis restitutae*”).⁶³ Surrendered under duress of conscience and fear of divine retribution, restitution figured as a condition of absolution, grounded in the conviction that moral order could be restored only by reinstalling spoils to their proper place.

Return as re-emplacement, however, was rarely the whole story. Historically, to return an object to its previous owner and to return it in good condition

56. See Ortner, “Plundered, Returned and Pillaged Again”; Howald, “The Power of Provenance.”

57. For examples, see Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 96–113; Göttler and Mochizuki, *The Nomadic Object*; Maratsos, “From Asia to Iberia.”

58. For examples, see Chastel, *The Sack of Rome*, 100–108.

59. Gamberini, *L'arte al tempo della ruina*, 47–61.

60. Okediji, “On Reparations,” who sees value in the dislocated objects as indexical traces of colonial violence.

61. Giglio, *The Foundations of Restitution*, 147–171.

62. For San Giacomo in Rome, see Vaquero Piñeiro, “Una realtà nazionale composita,” esp. 490–491; Chastel, *The Sack of Rome*, 103.

63. Tasca, “Il sacco di Roma.”



15. Michelangelo, *Bacchus*, 1496–1497. Marble. Florence, Museo del Bargello.



16. Flemish or Netherlandish artist, *Michelangelo's Bacchus*, after 1536–before 1555. Red chalk, pen and ink on paper, 475 x 315 mm. Cambridge, Trinity College.

were closely bound undertakings. Acts of *restoration* were seldom limited to re-emplacement alone but initiated a process of material re-stabilization that responded to the object's prior displacement, acknowledging its material vulnerability and actively managing the transformations accrued through looting. Raphael's Sistine tapestries (fig. 5), whose recovery and return we have already encountered in their legal and moral dimensions, were also a story of material repair.

Prior to their delivery, the frieze and side border underwent a substantial restoration; the intervention is immediately legible in the difference of warp count and color tone between the new weave and the original—perhaps deliberately so, as it has been argued, to underscore both the severity of the damage and the extent of Montmorency's restorative gesture. The inscription he included on the border emphasizes the layered nature of the repair offered: the tapestry is recovered (*conquisitam*), restored (*resarciendam*), and returned (*restituendam*) (fig. 6). Recovered, restored, returned, and, finally, reconsecrated. In his letter of thanks, Julius III reprises Montmorency's own Ciceronian language of restitution but shifts its referent, framing the tapestries' eventual restoration as a return to God himself. The pope dwells on the material implication of repair, singling out the excellent condition and form in which the tapestries have been returned as well as the remarkable craftsmanship (*miro artificio*) by which they have been restored.⁶⁴

Looted again during the Napoleonic occupation and again returned, the tapestries underwent a further restoration in 1814. A new inscription was woven into the border, once again conflating material and symbolic repair, declaring the tapestries “redeemed and restored” (*redemptas et instauratas*). As part of this intervention, Montmorency's own inscription was rewoven—so that what survives today is itself a repair of an earlier repair (fig. 6). The border thus registers a stratification of restorative campaigns, each layered over the last. Each cycle of looting generates its own cycle of redress, and each redress inscribes itself onto the material surface of the last, until the object becomes a palimpsest not of use but of capture and return.⁶⁵

Material repair could go further still. As repair and maintenance studies have shown, material care is rarely only material in scope—it intervenes

in the life of things at the level of narrative, recruiting the visible facts of repair into competing stories of provenance and origin. The right hand of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* is precisely a case in point. Damaged during the events of 1527, it was restored by reattaching the original fragment in the 1550s, after the sculpture had been allowed to pose for several years in a mutilated state—perhaps even longer if, as Kathleen Christian has now suggested, the hand was kept removable at will, as figural and written sources appear to affirm (fig. 16).⁶⁶

Its visible repair enabled the statue to pass both as a spoil of antiquity and as a spoil of early modern war. The restored hand could be absorbed into the well-worn script of antiquation, or made to bear the far more specific script of 1527. Contemporaries could easily exploit both possibilities, and in both cases the narrative redounded to the credit of the benign Jacopo Galli, to whose stewardship the sculpture's survival was owed. That an object could oscillate between these readings is not incidental, as the semantic itinerary of *spolia* from military to antiquarian regimes attests. But later, that oscillation collapsed into a single misreading: modern art historians, unaware of the *Bacchus*'s wartime vicissitude, interpreted the damage as an intentional breakage, perhaps even a ruse by Michelangelo, designed to antique the work through deliberate mutilation.

Repair is rarely legible on its own, even within the framework of individual object biographies. This is precisely because, when it succeeds too fully, restoring objects to places and conditions where they are understood to belong tends to efface the violence that made it necessary in the first place. Repair is not just an ethical afterword to loot, but one of its constitutive procedures: a maneuver by which the capture is either made legible or allowed to disappear. The reattachment of a marble fragment or a mismatched weave risk being read as aesthetic choices (the consequences of taste, artistic license, or workshop practice) rather than wartime histories if we do not consider the military regime of capture and return as a material force in its own right, one that classified, valued, transformed, and in some cases unmade the very things our discipline wishes to study. Absent this labor, loot disappears from view.

64. See note 25. De Strobel et al., *Leo X and Raphael*, vol. 2, pt. 7 and pt. 10; Shearman, *Raphael*, 1036: “Deoque primum cui sacra et dicata fuerunt, restitui curavit [emphasis ours], praesertim cum ea specie formaque redierint ut quod ad aspectum attinet nihil pulchrius possit desiderari, sitque pene incredibile ullum unquam naufragium ullumve detrimentum ea passa esse, tali ac tam miro refecta sunt artificio.”

65. De Strobel et al., *Leo X and Raphael*, vol. 1, *Regesto*, D101.1814.

66. On repair, see Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order”; Denis and Pontille, “Why Do Maintenance and Repair Matter?” with references. On the *Bacchus*, see Christian, *Raffaello Riario*, 226, 316–324; Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*.

On persistence: Or, the past is right in front of us

Over and against the presumption of loot's inherent centrifugal pull is thus an equal and opposite centripetal force, one that pulls toward return and restoration. Whether registered as a material, spatial, or juridical alteration, looting charges spoils with a kinetic potential that remains latent so long as they are held at a remove from their place or condition of origin. While scholarship remains fascinated by motion away, what gives this motion its semiotic charge is precisely the prospect of homecoming that it implies, no matter how implausible. An allegorical engraving made to commemorate the return of the quadriga of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate in 1814 makes this point especially visible (fig. 17).

The sculpture has come to life and marches itself back to Berlin eight years after its looting. Under the reins of Victory, the four bronze horses strain forward while Napoleon Bonaparte's team simultaneously pulls the carriage in the opposite direction, toward Paris and the sculpture's condition as spoil. But the emaciated state of Napoleon's horses and retrograde character of his movement—he pulls from the tail of the carriage, against its orientation and its destiny—leave no doubt as to which direction will prevail. The image figures loot not simply as displaced matter but as matter oriented toward return. For the quadriga, to move forward is to move backward.

To understand this is to observe that looting and restitution are twinned practices that exist in a conceptual and circumstantial dialectic, determining the movements of objects in war and peacetime, whether between conditions of ownership, states of matter, geographical boundaries, or institutional frameworks. The material regimes traced above—liquidation, inscription, repair—recur across the chapters in this volume to illuminate the relationships between war and the world of objects in the early modern period, bridging the domains of military history and material culture, which are too often treated in separation, and pushing art historians into spaces where they rarely venture, deep into armories and arsenals. Following loot as it moves from one site to another, the essays traverse a gamut of spaces: museum and archive, church façade and treasury, seafloor and battlefield.

We believe histories of loot must necessarily be transhistorical and global, but they should also interrogate, critically and creatively, the ambivalences that inform what we consider our disciplinary evidence. Taking a cue from anthropological readings of absence, we propose to set aside a crude notion of presence as linked to the physicality and tangibility of the original object and



17. Daniel Berger, *Allegorical Depiction of the Return of the Quadriga to the Brandenburg Gate*, 1814. Aquatint on vellum, 270 × 386 mm. Berlin, Stadtmuseum.

to explore beyond these confines, attending to the agency of missing, lost, abducted, and absent things.⁶⁷ Taken together, the essays gathered here counter the ostensible, and perhaps inevitable, loss of premodern loot to recover the consequences and affordances of the object's looting beyond the moment of its disappearance: in sculptural fragments that survive as monuments of mutilation (Rebecchini), in the pictorial replication and commemoration of decaying trophies (Tetteris), in maritime wreckage reimagined as Indigenous salvage and multispecies habitat (Rich). They also trace the ways that loot occupies the space of the page, whether poetically (Artico; Gamberini) or legally (Petrelli-Jones; Cleary and Somos). Still others evidence cases in which looting itself becomes a model for the artistic act, where destruction is the engine, real or metaphorical, of artistic creation (Goethals; Van Kessel; Rosenthal), or where it inspires, just as paradoxically, material preservation (Rodríguez Suarez).

67. Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen, *An Anthropology of Absence*; Meyer, "Placing and Tracing Absence," both drawing from Hetherington, "Secondhandedness." For absence in art history, see Fricke and Kumler, "Introduction"; Katz and Odell, *Nonextant Art*.

Following WASTEWORk (2022/23), this volume marks the second installment in the editorial series DIS/APPEARANCE, conceived within the Lise Meitner Group *Decay, Loss, and Conservation in Art History* at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome. Whereas the first volume approached early modern material culture through acts of disposal, removal, and abeyance, our second annual initiative in 2023/24 turned to a different form of loss, loot—its mechanics, afterlives, and reparative possibilities. A conference convened in Rome in May 2024, *Art in Times of War and Peace: Legacies of Early Modern Loot and Repair*, served as the anchor for the present collection.

As in our former project, we follow premodern material culture through the non-extant, via states of invisibility and disappearance. Rather than tracing only what survives, these essays consider how objects move in and out of view, how they circulate through gaps in the record, and how their meanings and material configurations shift as they are carried across enemy lines—literally, *post limen*—and enter new statuses of ownership. We do so by moving along the ever-attractive object biography or life history model that has productively shaped social sciences and humanities research since the 1990s. But we extend our attention beyond the physical constancy of the crafted object and follow its release into new material configurations—ruined, liquidated, wasted, spoliated, carved out, and hung up with the empty husks or hulls of the trophy. For loot, some now argue, we need not biographies but necrographies, death stories, and histories of loss.⁶⁸

We remain attentive to the futures these histories project and knowingly blend early modern vocabularies with present perspectives.⁶⁹ But looking ahead in this volume takes on a specific inflection as we follow long trajectories that run from the early modern battlefield to the present-day museum. Looted objects that do manage to survive are distinguished by their extraordinary persistence and thus their presence, seemingly against all odds, in the here and now. To consider abducted things beyond the moment of capture—that is, to trace their duration well into the proverbial

longue durée—is thus to arrive at the inevitable conclusion of where they are in the present, and of the futurities toward which they might conceivably point. The modes of taking and acquisition examined here do not sit inert in the past; their narratives of victory and defeat, conquest and appropriation, even their modes of display, lie at the origin of many heritage collections. We return to them now, at a time of expanding restitution efforts, and renewed conflict.

By virtue of this persistence, those objects that do survive raise questions to which the field of art history is called to respond. The need to grapple with loot is now informing practices that stand to shape the institutional futures toward which many European and North American museums orient their efforts. Their reparative protocols are often framed aspirationally and project objects into imagined futures that remain open-ended, shaped by choices yet to be made for the benefit (and scrutiny) of generations still to come. Among the most visible measures taken include the outright repatriation of permanent collection objects,⁷⁰ the staging of physical and virtual exhibitions around the topics of looting and restitution,⁷¹ and the cultivation of provenance research and of the “provenance curator,” whose primary responsibilities lie not in the production of exhibitions or the spearheading of acquisitions but instead in the tracing of histories of ownership.⁷² Curators, artists, and other professionals currently working within spaces where objects with contested histories reside are necessarily at the front lines of this work.

With that in mind, the second part of this volume moves from “The Early Modern Battlefield” to “The Modern-Day Museum,” bringing together different curatorial projects that address the challenges of working with

70. Historic looting and modern repair have generated a great deal of literature in scholarship and the museum world. Just as early modern seizures prompted the writing of regulations for the removal—and potential return—of objects, so too have today’s restitution practices likewise resulted in protocols that raise larger theoretical and ethical questions. For two central examples, see Sarr and Savoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain*; Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, *Return of Cultural Objects*.

71. From the gamut of exhibitions on this topic that have emerged within the past two decades, only a few have focused on early modern loot: *Krigsbyte = War Booty* (Stockholm, Livrustkammaren, November 23, 2007–February 28, 2009), on which see Wagner, “Responsibility for the Past?”; the virtual exhibition *Plunder and Glory. A Heritage of Looting* (Historisches Museum Bern, 2026); and the forthcoming *1527 Roma capta. Il sacco, le arti, la città* (Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale, Fall 2027).

72. On provenance: Milosch and Pearce, *Collecting and Provenance*; Tompkins, *Provenance Research Today*. These texts have practical corollaries in projects like the now archival *Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal* and the still active *Getty Provenance Index*. For an expanded application of the concept of provenance, see Feigenbaum and Jackson Reist, *Provenance*.

68. See Borgo and Ezra, *Wastework*, where we articulate more fully the move from materiality to materials and argue for the discipline’s engagement with the material impermanence of artifacts through the lens of discard studies. For a reflection on the application of the object biography in the social sciences: Joy, “Reinvigorating Object Biography.” For its criticism in colonial contexts, see Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 25–36, expanded in Hicks, “Necrography.”

69. On future-orientedness, see Harrison, “Heritage Practices”; Borgo and Ezra, “The Work of Waste,” 30–33; Di Palma, “The Promise of Waste.”

collections acquired by means of historic conflict or tied to geographies that have historically been subjected to violence. Each is a case study through which to observe what takes place when the history of looted objects is confronted with modern practices; each explores in a different way what can be learned using present-day museal processes. These offer models of how to productively contend with gaps in knowledge, whether by exploring the ways that different models of exhibition can incorporate breaks in the life narratives of objects that are documented only spottily (Fricke, Rossman, and Weber) or by demonstrating how provenance research can be used to trace the “chain of possession,” as per industry language, of a single work of art across its afterlife (Katzew). What comes into view via these examples are intervals between different states of ownership. The moment of an object’s capture is too often taken as an endpoint of one art historical inquiry, while the moment of its adoption into a collection is too readily taken as a starting point for another. Provenance shifts the emphasis onto the interval in between: a trajectory wherein capture is the beginning and accession the endpoint.

Long associated with modern art, especially with museum work and the retracing of Second World War dislocations, provenance research is now increasingly applied to premodern contexts and understood more broadly as a mode of knowledge about objects. In this expanded sense, provenance draws attention to the processes by which objects moved through changing hands, shifting frameworks for legitimate and illegitimate acquisition, and how ownership shapes material narratives. Looted objects in particular, as this volume shows, often bear the marks of this passage, having been physically altered, reclassified, and resignified through successive acts of possession.⁷³

Display, too, has a peculiar history in the case of looted objects, and further case studies that appear in this volume suggest a semiotics of display deriving not from art history or the history of collecting but instead from military history. The aggregation, dispersal, and eventual presentation of the contents of military collections have generated a taxonomy of objects and display modalities not easily accounted for by the fine arts categories of the standard art museum, nor by its playbook of installation styles, whether

salon-style, white cube, or black box. Here we see loot, functioning as a regime, dictate its own curatorial terms: a strangely intimate object like the sunglasses of the Libyan revolutionary leader Omar al-Mukhtar, for example, recalls the ancient Roman military tradition of the *spolia opima*.⁷⁴ Their display today at the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome registers and reflects on the conditions that first made such an object collectible (Delpino, Di Lella, and Lucchetti). Likewise, the use of mannequins to mount captured weapons in the former display of the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia in Florence (Thompson) has its origins in the Greek and Roman *tropaeum*, where weapons were stylized onto makeshift anthropomorphic supports.⁷⁵ In both cases, the kinds of objects and display practices that form the basis of heritage, colonial, and ethnographic collections take their cues less from art history than from military history. These taxonomies of display have the effect of arresting objects in an unreachable past, often speaking more of those who took them than of those from whom they were taken (Baloji). Spoils are the site at which these two histories most definitively intersect.⁷⁶ Some would argue that the successful interpretation of these objects, whether in the context of the military museum or the art museum, in fact depends on attention to this intersection.⁷⁷

Through these projects, and others like them, we see the regime of loot expose its intrinsic machinations. We observe, firstly, the interpretive possibilities that loot comes to possess by virtue of its seizure, which the temporary exhibition, inherently narrational, readily teases out. We observe, secondly, how object classifications between which looted objects are made to move as they cross geographic, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries—“trophy,” “treasure,” “cultural heritage,” “art,” even “diplomatic gift”—are never stable but determined by contextual framings and reframings, whether on the battlefield, in the permanent collection, or through temporary exhibition.⁷⁸ And we observe, finally, the ongoing power that objects with violent

74. For a model of how to read a nineteenth-century object through the lens of this classical typology, see Hartwell, “Framing Colonial War Loot.”

75. On the display of weapons and armor on mannequins, see also the remarkable case of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* in the Medici armory: Yousefzadeh, “Medici Moor.”

76. See especially Ariella Azoulay, who writes that “looting [is] at the heart of the modern formation of what is called art, analyzing how it was obscured and transformed into the history of collecting,” in Azoulay, *Potential History*, 83.

77. Lidchi, “Afterword,” 274; Crowley and Mills, *Weapons*.

78. Cippitelli and Toti, *Sammy Baloji*.

73. For this expansion into premodernity, see Lowe, *Provenance and Possession*; the DFG project *Premodern Provenance: Tracing, Telling and Imagining the Origins of Objects and Materials in the Medieval Mediterranean* at the Technische Universität Berlin (2025–2027); and the 2026/2027 Getty Research Institute Scholar Program “Provenance.”



18. Museo dell'Arte Salvata, 2025. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano.

histories hold for museum visitors, and the responsibilities this places on those charged with their care to interpret them for the present-day public.⁷⁹ In every case, we begin to see how the historic significances, circumstances, and circumscriptions of loot might offer avenues for new potentialities.

On June 15, 2022, a new museum of nearly unprecedented typology opened in Rome: the Museo dell'Arte Salvata, dedicated to the exhibition of recovered works of art, objects displayed upon their retrieval and before their eventual return to their places of origin (fig. 18). Operating under the aegis of the Museo Nazionale Romano, this “Museum of Rescued Art” showcases an ever-changing rotation of works of art restored to Italian patrimony by the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, an art theft squad established expressly for this purpose.⁸⁰ Demystifying *spolia*

back into legible spoils, this approach prioritizes the fact of their in-betweenness, spotlighting their transitional condition. The museum, with its inherently *impermanent* collection, thus tells stories that center the absence of artworks rather than their presence. It emphasizes gaps in history, over and against the presumption of continuous and unbroken historical timelines, and it foregrounds the movement of objects from one place to another, over and against the general perception of their stasis. It is a museological approach, in other words, that not only showcases looted art for what it is, but also makes the regime of looting itself an existential *dispositif*, raising questions around how we write our histories of art, and how we display them.

To be sure, the objects on view at the Museo dell'Arte Salvata are created as loot by a system of practices and structures alien to the world of the early modern battlefield. But whether as a result of piracy, warfare, tomb-raiding, or the black market for antiquities, the destruction or removal of objects from one place to another remains an ongoing source of precarity; it belongs to a history as old as Rome itself and yet continues to speak in the present tense. The city occupies a singular position in the broader landscape of looted art as a site both spoiled and recovered, with objects dislocated both to and from the peninsula at different points over the course of the centuries. The dualities of looting and restituting that characterize this very volume are the same that continue to characterize the city from which it was born. Saint Jerome, reflecting on the 410 CE sack of the city by Alaric, put it starkly in an adage that would ring true across the ages: “The city which has taken the whole world is itself taken.”⁸¹

With the quincentenary of the Sack of Rome nearly upon us and amid a flurry of initiatives on the horizon, this Roman history of looting, still unfinished, remains at the forefront of professional and public imagination. In Rome, we are reminded that the past is right in front of us.⁸² This volume invites historians of loot to meet it there.

79. See also Justin Thompson's exhibition *Minted in Enemy Bronze* (British School of Rome, November 8–December 8, 2023).

80. Rush and Benedettini Millington, *The Carabinieri Command*.

81. “Capitur urbs quae totum cepit orbem,” in Schaff and Wace, *St. Jerome*, 257.

82. On the presence of the past, see especially Balaji, “The Past in Front of Us.”

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