



HOUSE OF
EUROPEAN
HISTORY



An initiative of the European Parliament

PRESS RELEASE

Bellum et Artes - Europe and the Thirty Years' War

From 27 April 2024 to 12 January 2025, The House of European History presents the international exhibition "Bellum et Artes - Europe and the Thirty Years' War" which has at its heart the multifaceted role of the arts in a brutal war encompassing almost the whole continent.



Millions died from violence, hunger and disease. Entire regions were devastated and abandoned when a local, religious-fuelled conflict escalated into a pan-European war over the political shaping of Europe.

Bellum et Artes is part of a Europe-wide collaborative project involving twelve institutions from seven countries. The project is led by the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) and the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD). The exhibition in Brussels has been co-curated with the House of European History team and highlights the main results and findings of this international cooperation.

How do the arts figure in the Thirty Years' War? Co-curator Jitka Mlsova tells us: 'During the war, art production never stopped. On the contrary, art served many functions in this conflict: it documented battles on behalf of the victors, it represented the rulers' claims of power and wealth, it worked as a widespread means of propaganda, or it called for peace. Many artworks have been dispersed all over Europe as desired and – in that time – became legal spoils of war.'

Looting was a seemingly inevitable practice to co-finance the immense military costs of a war that was fought by mercenaries from all over Europe. Ransacking was not carried out only for money and supplies. Works of art fell prey to war parties as well, not just for the love of art, but also to seize the artworks' prestige and power of representation. Thus, famous European collections were dissolved and new ones emerged. The European ruling dynasties, including those of Spain, France, Denmark-Norway, Sweden, and the most powerful houses of the Holy Roman Empire, were linked through intricate family ties. They used political and religious alliances to assert inheritance claims, not solely through armed conflict, but also through the means of art – using precious art works as diplomatic gifts to build or strengthen networks of support.

The exhibition contains approximately 150 objects showing who was involved, the roles of the arts, the mechanics of warfare and the horrors caused by it, the media boom created by the conflicts, the displacement of artworks and the migration of artists, the road to peace and finally the aftermath which links it to Europe's present situation. As part of the exhibition, there will be additional events, such as movie screenings, guided tours, lectures by experts, and storytelling pulled from the voices and correspondence of people at the time.

About the House of European History

A place to debate, question and reflect on Europe's history. From myths and memories to the chaos and cohesion of the 20th century, the House of European History takes visitors on a journey along the path of Europe's history and challenges them to contemplate its future. An initiative of the European Parliament, the House of European History is located in the beautifully renovated Eastman Building in leafy Park Léopold. Tailored resources are available for schools, families and groups, offering a fascinating experience for all. Entrance to the museum is free.

About the Leibniz-Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO)

The interdisciplinary and transnationally oriented academic institute based in Leipzig focusses in its research on the region between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Sea. From Late Antiquity until the present, it examines peculiarities, transformations and interrelationships in an ever-more global world. Fundamental deep knowledge about Eastern Europe is created and shared with the public via research results, companion and guide books, exhibitions, events and digital knowledge resources.

About the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD)

The Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Dresden State Art Collections) are a museum complex with an international profile, comprising fifteen museums that offer a thematic diversity that is exceptional for its kind. Its origins lie in the Kunstammer of the Saxon Electors, founded around 1560, which was one of the first to be opened to the public. Systematic collecting formed the basis of today's museums, which see it as their central task to preserve and research the works and to help shape the future with innovative ideas.

Practical information



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Images for download and media use

Object credits:

- Johannes Wundes the Younger (active circa 1590–circa 1630) (rapier), Clemens Einhorn (dagger)**
Ornamental weapons set of Elector John George I of Saxony
Rapier and dagger, German, before 1640. Rüstammer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
Photo: Jürgen Karpinski
- War chest; armoured and suitable for use in the field with a sophisticated locking mechanism*
Rüstammer, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Thomas Seidel
- Domenico Fetti (1589–1623), David with the head of Goliath, 1614/1615**
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel, Hans-Peter Klut
- Martin John Callanan (born 1982), Wars during my lifetime, 2014, video, 14'.20", Courtesy of the artist**