The grab list: how museums decide what to save in a disaster

Billions of dollars' worth of art is imperilled by climate change. Curators will have to make sacrifices

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By Lou Stoppard

Mural" is the largest artwork that Jackson Pollock ever produced: a colossus, 8 feet high and 19 feet across (2.4 metres by 5.8 metres). It was commissioned in 1943 by the collector Peggy Guggenheim for the entrance hall of her New York apartment. "Mural" is an abstract work, but if you stare at it for long enough, figures seem to emerge within the mêlée of yellow, pink and deep, angry black. Bodies, both human and animal, rush from one end of the canvas to the other, and burst out, as if hurtling towards the viewer. Pollock described the work to a friend as a "stampede".

There was a brief thought that Pollock should paint "Mural" directly onto the wall, but Guggenheim's friend, the artist Marcel Duchamp, suggested it would be better on canvas; that way it would be movable. For historians, it marks a crucial turning point in Pollock's career, when he began experimenting with the style he's known for, splashing the canvas with paint and allowing streams of colour to flow.

In 1948 Guggenheim decided to donate "Mural" to the art department of the University of Iowa in Iowa City. It is the jewel in a large and eclectic collection that includes works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Robert Motherwell and Philip Guston. Following the construction of the university's own museum, then known as the University of Iowa Museum of Art, in 1969, the art was displayed in a low, square building just metres from the Iowa river.

The campus's proximity to the water makes for a picturesque setting—but a precarious one, as Rodney Lehnertz, the university's director of planning, design and construction at the time, told me. Flash floods, which the university is less at risk of, arrive suddenly: a crash of liquid and no time to prepare. Other kinds of flood events

are more complex. There are hints, certain preceding conditions—regular rainfall, frozen land—that evolve over months or years; undeniable after the fact, even if in the immediate aftermath of disaster it is soothing to say that nothing could have been done.

In 1993 Iowa was struck by such a flood "event". Water seeped onto the university's campus, but the damage was minimal. Perversely, people seemed reassured, rather than warned. "We were like, that was the flood to end all floods," Lehnertz told me. The museum's basement was later designated as unusable, since it was so susceptible to leakage. Yet upstairs, exhibitions continued to be mounted and visitors welcomed. A reservoir dam that sits a few miles upstream of campus was trusted to hold up.

If forest fires were coming, the team at Los Angeles County Museum of Art would probably go straight for their version of Monet's "Water Lilies", or works by Cézanne and Picasso

In early 2008 this blind confidence proved misplaced. A late freeze in the upper Midwest made it impossible for the snow to melt, and for the ground to soak up above-average rainfall. Water poured into the tributaries of the Iowa river and flowed towards the reservoir. Month by month the levels rose. By June the quantity was uncontainable. "The arts campus filled up in 45 minutes, once it went over," Lehnertz said.

University staff were given a week's notice that the dam was unlikely to hold. Yet they still struggled to accept the consequences. Kathy Hayslett, who worked as a curator at the museum, described sitting in a campus flood-planning meeting—where the mood was one of what Lehnertz called only "casual alarm"—and thinking that the art surely had to be moved. "Is it even possible to evacuate it?" she remembers thinking. In the end, the decision was made by the museum's insurer, Lloyd's of London: get the work out.

Museums are already a case study in what we value—the works that are collected, conserved and displayed show what certain societies and individuals have deemed important over the centuries. Their choices become representative of eras, cultures, lives; their decisions cascade, influencing future perceptions of what's valuable. But rarely is the process of prioritisation made as explicit as it is during an evacuation.

At the university's art museum, the evacuation order was determined by predicted monetary value: in other words, the estimated sale price of each work. After the 1993 flood, a list of the 75 most-expensive works was compiled, with the Pollock—then insured for $140m—in pole position. Hayslett spent hours on the phone to Sotheby's, running through their recent auction prices to update the valuations, in order to work out what should go next. Adam Prideaux, a fine-art insurance broker, calls such inventories "the grab list". If forest fires were coming, the team at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) would probably go straight for their version of Monet's "Water Lilies", or works by Cézanne and Picasso. And if the Seine threatened to burst its banks, the team at the Louvre would undoubtedly snatch the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo.

"Mural" left Iowa on a refrigerated truck, accompanied by armed guards, for a storage facility in Chicago, some 200 miles (320km) away. "Karneval", a triptych from 1943 by the German painter Max Beckmann, was put on a separate truck, to avoid the museum's two most valuable works travelling together. Pamela White, the museum's interim director, recalled a moment of panic when the university's director told journalists that the artwork was in transit. "Our collection was insured for a quarter of a billion dollars, maybe a third of a billion dollars, and now we have people telling the world that it's...on the road to Chicago," White said. "There was worry that these trucks would get hijacked," Hayslett added.

Meanwhile, Hayslett was concerned for the safety of the museum's collection of African, pre-Columbian and Native American art, which was not considered as financially valuable as the work by Western artists and was thus lower on the priority list. Not only were many of these works intricately decorated with delicate feathers or fine carvings, they were irreplaceable examples of cultural heritage. Were they not also worth saving, she wondered?

Within a few days, museum staff had packed and moved more than 10,000 works. Eventually, as trucks struggled to reach the campus, volunteers carried the drawings collection by hand to higher ground. "We were literally sleeping in the museum," said Melissa Mohr, who was then just a week into a junior role. "The rule was, if you felt like you were so tired that you would do damage to something, you needed to take a break. But otherwise, we were working around the clock." Lehnertz recalled seeing people in orange jumpsuits from the state penitentiary stacking sandbags with Amish farmers. "It looked like a bad Hallmark movie," he said, "but very inspiring."

On the morning of June 13th, the call to evacuate finally came. Museum staff had an hour until the National Guard would lock the museum. Everyone was rushing to move things; anything left behind was placed on high shelves. When time was up, the doors were bolted, and the staff sent away. And then the water came.

What is the point of a museum? One answer is to give the public access to art and culture. At the same time, institutions are meant to safeguard these works: for scholars, visitors, future generations. These goals have always been contradictory. Art would undoubtedly be safer if it was locked away in vaults, never exposed to a curious and, sometimes, unpredictable public—wandering around with coffee cups, excitable children or cans of soup, like the activists of Just Stop Oil (who for years defaced artworks as a form of protest). The growing threat posed by climate change has made these goals even harder to reconcile.

At the time, the epic flood that submerged 22 buildings on the University of Iowa's campus, including the museum of art, seemed a uniquely terrible event for a museum: an almost absurd departure from the slow, precise movements that usually dictate the handling of art. Yet in the two decades since, more and more institutions have found themselves facing the conundrum of how to guard the safety of their works in the event of a climate-related catastrophe. For museums of all sizes and budgets, preparation can be overwhelming, even futile. "We had a disaster kit. We found it floating in the floodwater," the chairman of the Downpatrick and County Down Railway Museum, in Ireland, said in 2023, after the museum's vintage locomotives had been drenched beyond repair by a large storm.

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Art institutions have long tried to master their environment. To protect their work from deterioration, lighting is kept low; temperatures are set between 16-20°C; humidity must be in the range of 40-70%, with shifts of no more than 5% within a short time period. Since they started to be implemented in the 1970s, these have come to be known as "standard" museum conditions. But many conservators think they are arbitrary, and should be adapted to suit the local climate and the materials used in artworks. Some conservators also worry that the methods used to protect works—energy-hungry cooling systems, specially made crates for shipping that are rarely re-used, and transit by aeroplane to ensure rapid, smooth journeys—are unnecessarily wasteful. "It's a process which is implicitly presenting itself as being about sustainability in terms of sustaining artworks for future generations, but then it's so unsustainable," Kim Kraczon, a Berlin-based conservator, told me.

Most institutions, particularly large national museums, will not lend their works without the guarantee of strict environmental conditions. That means that galleries in places already deemed too hot, humid, volatile or simply poor to fund such expensive measures are already not loaned what many elite institutions consider their greatest works of art, should they ask for them.

And yet much of the world's most famous art is currently housed in cities that are vulnerable to disaster. The banks of the Thames are dotted with some of London's best-known museums, including Tate Britain and Tate Modern. In January 1928 the Tate, or the National Gallery, Millbank, as it was then known, flooded, damaging over 300 works, of which 18 were destroyed. J.M.W. Turner's works on paper, stored in the basement, were soaked in muddy water but were evacuated just before their colours ran; at one point the museum's director had to be fished out of the water after falling down a manhole.

Today, the Tates are protected from tidal flooding by the Thames Barrier, one of the largest movable flood barriers in the world. But London is facing more storms than ever, and the barrier was designed to last until 2030: just 5

years away (some engineers have predicted that it could operate to the same standard until 2070). The Louvre, in Paris, sits in a similarly vulnerable position by the Seine. In a leaked memo from January, Laurence des Cars, the museum's director, mentioned that some galleries "are no longer watertight" and that "others experience significant temperature variations, endangering the preservation of artworks". Some 100,000 of the Louvre's works have already been moved to a storage facility in Lievin, 120 miles north of Paris, but the situation remains perilous for those by the river.

The Louvre is one of many prestigious public museums that has no insurance for its permanent art collection, in part because their works are considered irreplaceable. The chairman of London's National Gallery, which is similarly uninsured, has claimed that it would simply be too expensive to do so. In contrast, private collections and institutions see coverage as essential, and fight to secure it. Manhattan has become the third-most-expensive place in the world, behind Florida and California, to insure art. "Partly because of the concentration of wealth, and the concentration of cultural institutions in those areas," Jennifer Schipf, who underwrites fine art for AXA XL, told me.

Prideaux, the insurance broker, called Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York in 2012, a moment of utter "chaos" within the art world. "No one believed it was actually going to submerge so much of Manhattan," he said. ("It literally turned into a bathtub," said Schipf. "I remember walking into a gallery and seeing a sculpture just sort of bob around.") Afterwards, the insurance claims were staggering. But it could have been worse, Prideaux said. He recalled sitting in the Lloyd's of London headquarters and watching, on a map on an underwriter's screen, the storm pass over the Delaware Freeport, where some of the world's biggest collectors stash their art to avoid taxation. "There's billions of art in there, so we are all out of business if it destroys it," Prideaux recalled the underwriter saying.

In the years that followed, some New York institutions tried to mitigate the risks of flooding. The Whitney Museum of American Art, which sits alongside the Hudson river, was in the middle of constructing its new building when Sandy dumped 6m gallons of water into the 30-foot-deep basement. Architects were forced back to the drawing board. After reviewing flood maps and storm projections, they decided to elevate the lobby by 16.5ft (their original design had already set it higher than the government recommendation). They also commissioned Walz and Krenzer—manufacturers of doors for naval vessels—to supply ten-inch-thick aluminium-plate floodgates to protect art-loading docks; these can withstand the impact of nearly 7,000 pounds (3,175kg) of debris. The museum is now "designed like a submarine", according to Kevin Schorn, an architect and engineer who worked on the museum.

Jacqueminet advises other museums on how to select works to save. "They say, my God, it's like deciding

between my children"

Uptown, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is building the new Tang wing for modern and contemporary art, which will open in 2030. It was originally meant to have several levels of storage below ground, but plans were scrapped after Hurricane Ida flooded parts of the museum in 2021. "We are now not putting art storage below ground anymore, period," Brett Gaillard, the museum's head of capital and infrastructure planning, told me. The Met had long intended to upgrade its main chiller plant, which controls the "standard" conditions across some 1.5m square feet of the museum, Originally, the plan was to keep it where it was, on a lower floor, but Ida made staff realise this was impossible (it will now sit above ground level). Pivoting was a logistical nightmare, but, as Gaillard put it, there was no other option: "These 100-, 200-, 500-year flood events are now actually happening multiple times within one decade, and will continue to do [so]."

For less-well-funded institutions, building redesigns are often impossible; instead, they must navigate through the threats posed by climate change with a mixture of hope and acceptance. In 2023 Nathalie Jacqueminet, the conservation manager at the National Gallery of Iceland, attended a conference about the Notre Dame fire (which was probably caused by an electrical fault or cigarette, rather than weather). By some fluke, she told me, one of Notre Dame's curators had finished an emergency plan shortly before the fire started. The head of the Paris fire services had suggested, to the curator's horror, that their priority list of objects to evacuate should be no more than five. "Impossible," the curator had replied. "We have so many very important objects." She made a list with 19 items. "In the end, while [the emergency services] moved some objects within the church, they took only five objects out," Jacqueminet recounted. "It is just not their role."

Jacqueminet was inspired to create a document with images of five key works in each of the National Gallery's 12 rooms and information about how to move them safely. She showed them to the fire department and keeps printed versions in the museum's offices. Choosing was "very painful", she said. She ended up prioritising some of the National Gallery's early Icelandic artworks, which

show the development of a national style that is attuned to the magnificence of nature. They may be less valuable, in monetary terms, than works by buzzy contemporary artists in the collection, but they could never be acquired again.

As a member of the Icelandic Museum Council and the Icelandic arm of Blue Shield—sometimes dubbed the cultural Red Cross, which sends missions to protect artworks and antiquities during crises or conflicts—Jacqueminet advises other museums on how to select works to save. “They say, my God, it’s like deciding between my children.” She tells them to imagine themselves in the reality of the moment: “What would you say to a firefighter at the door?” One must think practically, too, about which objects can easily be moved and are near fire escapes.

For some institutions, the idea of moving works at all is untenable: they are either too cumbersome, too fragile or too intimately connected to the spirit of the building that houses them. Such was the case at the Rothko Chapel, a minimalist museum-cum-sanctuary in Houston. The building itself was conceived by Mark Rothko himself and the 14 monumental canvases exhibited there are site-specific.

In August 2024 the chapel was hit by Hurricane Beryl, its second disaster in less than ten years. In 2017 Hurricane Harvey had flooded the chapel's basement, which contained their heating and cooling systems. "We lost everything," the museum's former executive director, David Leslie, told me. The chapel had subsequently relocated the electrics. But the roof let them down with Beryl. Water trickled from the ceiling onto four of the paintings. One piece of a triptych which sits on the east wall—a trio of dark, inky canvases that have the melancholy beauty of a starless sky—was particularly damaged. Ridges developed on its surface and paint flaked off. Leslie hadn't considered evacuation—the works were too large and he trusted that the building was safe.

When I spoke to Leslie in January, the chapel had recently reopened. But visitors were met by gaps on the wall, where the damaged works used to be. The effect of the absences can be sobering, Leslie admitted, but he hoped it could provoke reflection. "Everything is impermanent," he said. "It's a reminder of our vulnerability in relation to climate change."

In late December last year, I spoke to Camille Kirk, the head of sustainability at the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles, and Alexandria Sivak, head of collections at the Getty Conservation Institute. The institute is widely viewed as one of the best conservation facilities in the world (their team took care of "Mural" after the Iowa flood). The Getty's own collection, housed in its centre, includes works by Turner, Van Gogh and Rubens; its villa, which sits in the Pacific Palisades neighbourhood some ten miles away, contains Greek and Roman treasures.

"It was not lost on me that the Getty Villa is modelled on a villa at Herculaneum that ultimately came to ruin as the result of a major natural disaster"

Working in an area vulnerable to natural disasters, Kirk and Sivak had long been thinking about what it means to

preserve art. “If we don’t have a planet that we can live on, or if governments that are funding arts institutions are having to shovel all of their money into disaster response and resilience and mitigation efforts, what are we going to do to care for the collection anyway?” Kirk said. Both she and Sivak told me they felt confident in Getty’s preparation for earthquakes: these include grids of steel beams to stop works from falling off the walls if they crumble, as well as mounts for sculptures that are tunnelled into the floor.

They mentioned that they were worried about the growing number of wildfires across LA, each seemingly more ferocious than the last. Just two weeks after our conversation, in early January, the grounds of the Getty Villa were on fire. The blaze—part of a series of wildfires that spread simultaneously—was the most destructive in LA’s history.

The Getty, as the richest museum in the world, does not evacuate works in times of crisis. Instead, it shuts down like a fortress, relying on fire-retardant features that have been years, and billions of dollars, in the making. “We are the safest building in Los Angeles. The rest could be the rubble on the ground, and we will still be standing,” Timothy Potts, the museum’s director, told me.

Katherine Fleming, president and chief executive of the J. Paul Getty Trust, recalled watching the villa gardens burn on a wall of screens in a secure room dubbed the emergency command centre. Visibility was limited—wiring and cameras at the villa were melting from the heat—but the Getty team was able to communicate with the 16 staff members who were sheltering inside the villa. Every now and then, one of them rushed out with fire extinguishers to put out a spark.

What saved the villa was a mixture of luck—two of the Getty’s experts in fire protection happened to be on site that day—and planning. They had stayed on top of their

landscaping and irrigation, clearing oil-rich plants like eucalyptus, which tends to explode into fireballs. “It was not lost on me that the Getty Villa is modelled on a villa at Herculaneum that ultimately came to ruin as the result of a major natural disaster,” Fleming told me.

There was a point when it looked like several LA arts institutions could be lost to the fires. This included the Eames House, the mid-century home built and lived in by the industrial designers Charles and Ray Eames. By the time I spoke to Eames Demetrios and Lucia Atwood, grandchildren of the Eames and heads of the Eames Foundation, which works to preserve the house, the immediate danger to the structure had passed, but flames were still burning nearby.

Both Demetrios and Atwood grew up in the house. When it became clear it was at risk, they drove from their current homes in LA to load as many of its contents into their cars as possible. They based their selection on a list they’d prepared after a wildfire in 2019, choosing items that would capture the feel of the place: a few books from the shelves and a few objects from the tables, so as to be able to replicate elsewhere, if need be, their grandparents’ skill for arrangement. “We could not take everything on the list because some were too fragile for a rushed

evacuation," Atwood said, so delicate items were moved away from windows.

In the end, the Eames House survived with only smoke damage. But the close call was a reminder of its vulnerability. Unlike many other arts institutions, "it itself is the work of art," said Fleming from the Getty, which is helping to conserve the house. For Demetrios, the magic of the house comes from the intangible and the irreplaceable: "This is the seat that they sat [in], and this is the original paint, the original landscape, the community around it."

Recently, Atwood hired the architect Liz MacLean to work on the Eames House's "250 Year Project", which plans for the long-term preservation of the house. Some of MacLean's suggested measures are preventative: cutting trees back to the size they were when the Eames first arrived and planting fire-retardant species along the site's perimeter. But MacLean is also preparing for a day when the Eames House may be unable to escape destruction. She has been laser-scanning the 1,500 square foot home, room by room, to bulk out the already extensive collection of photographs that exist of the building. "You would have a road map for what was there," she told me, "a 3D view of the house, if God forbid, it would be the only thing that would remain."

Art is mutable. Greek sculptures were not white, as we think of them today; originally they were covered in lurid paint. Figures and details have been added into works at the whims of political regimes; conservation measures have been done and undone. Vandalism and decay are also part of the language of contemporary art, with artists using materials that evolve and degrade over time. Some even destroy their own work.

Socrates envisages itself as a "collection of work that becomes part of the landscape"

Their efforts can seem provocative, if one clings to the belief that art's purity is synonymous with an unchanging nature. Yet today, a lively group of thinkers argues for art's destruction as a preservation strategy. Fernando

art's destruction as a preservation strategy. Fernando Domínguez Rubio, in his book "Still Life", argues that artworks should not be seen as fixed, but as a "slow event that is still taking place as it evolves through organic and inorganic processes". He writes that we should consider even the most beloved and historical masterpieces as "slowly unfolding disasters".

Similarly, Jane Henderson, who teaches at Cardiff University and serves as secretary-general of the International Institute for Conservation, has argued against the removal of signs of distress or neglect from objects, referring to it as a form of "cleaning up history". To a future museum visitor, a damaged painting may say more than one that has been shielded from the passage of time. Researchers at the City University of New York conducted a survey in which they asked participants to imagine that the Mona Lisa had been destroyed in a fire. Would they rather see the ashes or a faithful copy? Eighty per cent of respondents said the ashes.

Kim Kraczon, the conservator, told me that she was interested in giving works a "dignified death". Recently, she worked with Kirsty Robinson, director of museum and curatorial studies at Western University in Canada, on what they called a "do not resuscitate order" for artworks. They formulated terms for a contract that institutions might sign upon buying the work of contemporary artists (known as an acquisitions rider) refusing all conservation treatments.

Kraczon encourages artists to reject the idea that their work, once bought, must be permanently surrendered. She cited the artist Edgar Calel, from the indigenous Maya-Kaqchikel group, who brokered a deal to have Tate Liverpool be a custodian, rather than owner, of his work "Ru k'ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el" (The Echo of an Ancient Form of Knowledge), in which ritual stones are topped with fruit and vegetables. After 13 years, the contract with Tate will be renegotiated: the work may then pass on to another institution, or, if Calel and his community decide it best, return to the earth. Such a contract allows an artist to send a message about "letting go and grieving for the world around us", Kraczon said.

Katie Dixon and Sean Leonardo, co-directors of Socrates Sculpture Park, in Queens, New York, are putting similar principles into practice. The park, which was built nearly 40 years ago on a landfill site between two of the largest housing projects in America, floods constantly; during Sandy it was completely underwater. The team has chosen to accept these disastrous moments as opportunities for artists to embrace "reality", as Leonardo put it. Art rusts, morphs, collapses, disappears entirely; some works, made of plants, grow into new forms or die. Socrates envisages itself as a "collection of work that becomes part of the landscape", Dixon said.

A few days after the National Guard shut down the University of Iowa's Museum of Art in June 2008, Kathy Hayslett and Pamela White went to a hardware shop to buy waders. Together, they trekked up a nearby hill to get a view of the museum. "The water was halfway up the building," Hayslett said. "It was just this moment of almost absurdity."

Rodney Lehnertz was in charge of negotiating with the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The organisation allocates budget for repairs in relation to both the cost of damage sustained and the potential costs of rebuilding. Because the museum's biggest assets—the art—had been removed by the time of the flood, FEMA was unwilling to sign off on a large sum to rebuild the facility. "I almost felt like we

were punished for saving the work," Hayslett told me.

Meanwhile, the art sat in purgatory in Chicago. "Things had been evacuated so quickly, they weren't necessarily in the best shape," White said. She recalled arriving at a warehouse to find "Mural" just leaning against a wall: "That was not good."

One year after the flood, the team agreed to move much of the collection to the nearby Figge Museum, where it could be cared for properly. But behind the scenes, there was a stalemate over the university museum's future. In July 2010 FEMA confirmed it would not provide the money for a new museum. On top of that, Lloyd's would no longer insure a collection stored that close to the river, meaning the works could not return to the old building, even if it was fixed. The next year Scott Raecker, a Republican state representative, introduced a bill to force the sale of "Mural" to raise funds for the university's repair, but it was quickly withdrawn after a backlash. "There was certainly a lot of feeling after the flood, at the university, and maybe in the wider art world, of who is the University of Iowa museum? Why do they have this?" White told me. "They don't even understand art. They're in the middle of nowhere."

"We are not hubristic. It's like, holy shit, that was a close call"

In the end, it took nearly 15 years—and $50m, over half of which was funded by private donors—for the University of Iowa to get its new museum. It opened as the Stanley Museum of Art in 2022 (the name honours local benefactors). The museum is still located by the river, but on a plot designated by engineers not to be at risk of flooding. "Mural" spans almost the entirety of one wall, on the second storey of the building.

Today, when Lehnertz, who still works at the university, walks around the galleries, he cannot help but feel moved by the effort it took to reopen. He knows that a refusal to face the facts contributed to the flood's devastation. "It was all coming, and we were warned," he said. But it was also a refusal to bow to pressure that ensured the museum eventually re-opened. Was this "naive optimism" self-delusion, he wondered, or an essential tool to get

through life?

I thought of Lehnertz's words a few weeks later, when I spoke to Katherine Fleming, of the Getty, after the LA fires. "We are not hubristic. It's like, holy shit, that was a close call," Fleming told me. She noted that there is a creeping acceptance that no place in the city is immune from climate threats. In 2022 the global insurers AIG pulled out of covering homes in LA. Gallerists in the city told me that, even before this bout of fires, they had to go and approach several providers to try to find coverage. California's Department of Insurance has issued a one-year moratorium on the cancellation or non-renewal of residential policies; it is unclear what will happen once that ends.

Yet so many residents who had been affected by the fires had described to me their plans to rebuild. "The delusion is part of being resilient," Fleming observed. She linked that to art, which she sees as "a reflection of the human awareness of the fragility of the human condition".

Thirty-six hours after Fleming had watched the flames from the control room, she re-entered the Getty Villa's galleries. "They were pristine. Absolutely pristine. There was not even the slightest speck of dust," she said. The rooms were awash with golden artefacts—part of an exhibition on Thrace, an ancient territory that morphed and decayed over time, through wars and border struggles (its historic boundaries fall within modern Bulgaria, Romania and Macedonia). "There was something about seeing these incredibly beautiful objects, just sitting there, completely calm, completely placid, kind of timeless," Fleming said. "It made me think, something is still beautiful even if there is no one there to look at it." ●

Lou Stoppard is a London-based writer and curator

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