

*Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art*  
Verbal Descriptions

**Tiered Seder Set**

13 3/4 by 14 inches

18th-19th century

Brass: cast and engraved, Wood: painted and stained; ink on paper; silk: brocade; linen; cotton.

This ceremonial object is a Tiered Seder Set, which would be used to hold ritual foods during the Jewish holiday of *Pesach* or Passover. The set features a stack of wooden trays and cups, held in a bronze and fabric cylindrical case. It was made between the 18th and 19th centuries in Eastern Europe, in the region of Eastern Galicia or in Western Ukraine. The dimensions are 13 3/4 by 14 inches and the shape is roughly a cylinder, about the size of a multi-layer cake or a stack of dinner plates. The materials include cast and engraved brass, painted and stained wood, ink on paper, a silk embroidered brocade, linen, and cotton.

Now I will describe this object from the bottom up. The base of this seder set is a dark black painted wood, with several small rounded feet that allow the object to hover less than a half inch above the surface upon which it sits. Moving up, the lower mid-section of this object is composed of three round, wooden tiers or trays for holding pieces of matzah, or thin, flat, unleavened bread. However, these wooden tiers are hidden behind strips of embroidered silk that wrap around their edges like a ribbon on a roll. This cloth ribbon is coral colored with white embroidery featuring an organic decorative pattern of leaves, branches and birds. These wooden tiers covered in silk rest in a cylindrical case of open brasswork, topped with decorative lions and crowns. The brasswork is like a lattice encircling the contents of the set. The surface quality of the brass metalwork is antiquated and weathered, smooth and sturdy rather than sleek or shiny. The curves and ornamental quality of the brasswork resembles the ironwork of intricate gates.

Resting on top of the openwork grill, are three pairs of lions cast in brass. Upright and facing each other in profile, these pairs of triumphant animals encircle the whole upper portion of the seder set. They are about 4 inches tall. The lion pairs each stand on their hind legs, their front paws resting on a brass oval frame. The frames contain papers inscribed with Hebrew writing. The text framed within each pair of lions contains the blessings over the eating of unleavened bread and bitter herbs and the inscription: *Thus did Hillel, at the time the Holy Temple was in existence*. Atop these ovals are brass crowns.

Resting on the top wooden platter, behind the lions, are five stained wooden cups each lined in a royal purple colored fabric. These wooden containers resemble small goblets or egg cups. The chalice-shaped containers would traditionally hold a small amount of symbolic foods. Rising from the center of these wood cups is a tall container circled by a band of brass decorated with pointed cutouts.

The overall stylistic impression of this tiered seder set is one of robust energy and celebratory flair. The lions masquerade around the tiered set like horses on a carousel. The mixture of materials adds a degree of variety and sensory richness.

For more on this work, scroll down to the “More Like This” section.

## **Henri Matisse**

*Girl in Yellow and Blue with Guitar*

1939

Oil on Canvas. 25 x 19 1/2 inches

This painting is titled *Girl in Yellow and Blue with Guitar*. It was created in 1939 by the French artist, Henri Matisse. The dimensions of this painting are 25 inches tall by 19 ½ inches wide, roughly the proportions of a hand towel. The orientation is vertical. The medium is oil on canvas.

The subject is a young woman, whose seated form occupies the majority of the pictorial space. This woman rests comfortably in a peach colored armchair in an interior environment at the center of the painting. Matisse has rendered the woman's form with bold, energetic brush strokes.

The woman's pink flesh is draped in the folds of a full length blue dress that cascades down to cover her feet. Her dress is a grey-blue hue augmented by some swaths of paint in a buttery yellow color, all contained within bold black brushstrokes that outline the figure almost like a character in a coloring book. The figure appears to gaze out casually at the viewer, a slight closed-mouth smile apparent as she leans her body toward the right side of the painting. On this right side, the woman's elbow is perched leisurely on the arm of the chair, her hand grazing the side of her face, pointer finger extending to the tip of her eyebrow. She meets our gaze, her expression confident, coy, but impenetrable. This gesture frames her heart-shaped face as her soft black, wavy hair curls down to the nook of her shoulders. Her dress crosses in front of her chest, like a robe, creating a v-neck. Matisse has painted the woman's left side and shoulder in that buttery yellow, suggestive of perhaps a shawl. A thick line of yellow appears at the midsection of her skirt, perhaps indicating a detail in the garment. Her other hand lays gently across her lap, stretching across to her knee at the right of the painting. Effortlessly held within this hand is the thin black neck of a simple acoustic guitar. The pear shaped instrument is painted in the same peach color as the armchair. The smooth rounded undulation of its body echoes the curvature of the armchair.

Now I'll describe the setting in which this woman is seated. The woman's body and guitar occupy the majority of the pictorial space in this painting, however a few details of the room are vivid. The floor is bright scarlet, and a thin black three-legged triangular plant stand sits just to the right of the woman. A single orange, oval vase appears on the stand, supporting an emerald green tropical plant that splays outward and over the vase. Behind the woman, is a blue curtain with strong vertical black stripes spaced several inches apart. The blue of the curtain matches the blue of the woman's dress.

The curtain falls to the midsection of her skirt on the left of the painting, but diminishes in length as it reaches back towards the plant in the right corner, making visible a subtle depth to the room.

The brushwork is visible in fluid, bold strokes. Parts of the canvas peek through between swaths of paint. The direct and confident energy of the brushstrokes, together with the solid patches of bold color, create a leisurely and seductive mood . For more on this work, scroll down to the “More Like This” section.

**Otto Freundlich***The Unity of Life and Death*

1936-38

Oil on canvas

This is a work by the artist Otto Freundlich titled, *The Unity of Life and Death*, made between 1936 and 1938. It is an oil on canvas and measures 46 ½ inches in height and 36 ½ inches in width. The painting has a thin black interior frame set within a thick white frame.

This is an abstract painting composed of different geometric shapes. The shapes vary in size and form but they all share straight edges. Not one shape is defined by a curved line. The colors the artist uses are the primary colors—red, blue and yellow—that he adjusts through differing tones resulting in various shades of the three colors. He also uses orange, ochre, grey, black and white. The intermittent black and white squares create a syncopated rhythm. In smaller sections the colors are grouped together in arrangements with like colors, but throughout the painting the colors appear to be arranged randomly. The painting's shapes interlock as if pieces in a puzzle, or an abstract quilt, not confined to traditional patterns. This seamless abstraction appears flattened, as if pressed against the picture plane.

Looking at the piece in its entirety, different directional elements come into focus. As the viewer faces the painting, a diagonal thrust composed of smaller shapes juts out from the upper left of the painting to the mid area of the right side – it stops before it meets the edge of the canvas. The shapes behind the diagonal appear to swing and sway to the right. In the bottom half of the painting, the shapes are arranged in a disjointed horizontal fashion.

This work conveys movement and dynamism. The kaleidoscope of shapes and colors bears a relationship to stained glass, in which the artist was skilled.

For more on this work, scroll down to the “More Like This” section.

## **Camille Pissarro**

*Minette*

1872

Oil on canvas

This is a work by the artist Camille Pissarro titled, *Minette* from 1872. It is an oil on canvas and measures 18 inches in height and 13 7/8 inches in width. This is a portrait of the artist's daughter, Minette, at around age 7.

Minette has golden brown hair that hangs to her shoulders and is pulled off her face by a bow that rests atop her head. Her skin is a light pink, her lips are red and her dark eyes gaze to the viewer's right. She wears a blue long-sleeved smock which appears utilitarian, perhaps made of cotton or linen. Peeking beneath the smock is a red checkered dress, followed by grey bloomers, white stockings and red socks that emerge from plain brown shoes. Her hands are clasped, fingers entwined, coming together at her midsection. Behind Minette is an expandable dining table pushed against the wall. Three objects are placed on the table. Closest to Minette is a crystal decanter, followed by a painted porcelain tea caddy and a silver tea or coffee pot. There is a shelf above the table that holds a single green wine bottle.

The room Minette stands in is muted in tones. Pissarro represents only a corner area of a larger room. The short wall farthest from the child, angles to the viewer's left. Dark green wainscoting rises up from the floor followed by patterned wallpaper in the same muted tones. The long wall to our right, directly behind Minette, angles towards the viewer. The wall is a muddy pink, similar in tone to the girl's skin. The lighting is flat, without a clear source.

Pissarro's visible brushwork conveys the different textures in the painting. We assume the space below Minette's feet is a carpet because the swirling, reddish brown brush strokes convey the lushness of its material. We understand the sweetness of youth through the rose-colored brushwork that highlights the cheeks of the artist's beloved daughter. Pissarro lost his child two years after he painted this work, when Minette died due to an illness.

For more on this work, scroll down to the "More Like This" section.

**Dor Guez**

Letters from the Greater Maghreb

2020

Archival inkjet prints, 14 1/8 × 43 in. (36 × 109 cm)

This is a work by the artist Dor Guez titled *Letters from the Greater Maghreb (detail)*. It was made in 2020, and is from an edition of archival inkjet prints that measure 14 1/8 inches in height and 43 inches, or about 3 ½ feet, in width.

This horizontal digital photograph shows a fragment of a text. It is a close-up of handwriting on lined paper. The lettering is dark blue in color and the writing is tight and precise. Its precision and control render the letters' marks beautiful. The paper is off white; the lines that support the words are grey. The fragment zooms in on 3 lines of text that are obscured by a large ink blot. The stain is transparent blue and is caused by water that turned blue when it spread over the ink of the text. Some of the letters are eradicated by the stain. It appears the paper must have been folded because the left and right side of the stain are mirror images of each other, like a Rorschach ink blot. The stain is the shape of a spider with the largest blot in the center representing the spider's body and the spreading rivers of the stain representing the spider's legs. In the large center blot there are symmetrical yellow discolorations and a thin yellow vertical line in the center where the paper had been folded. There are also faded, ghost impressions of writing either coming through from the reverse side of the paper or caused by creasing wet paper.

The artist's grandparents escaped from concentration camps in Nazi occupied Tunisia, part of the Maghreb region of North Africa. The grandparents later immigrated to Israel. Many of their personal documents suffered from water damage during their journey. This text fragment is an enlarged scan from a manuscript written by the artist's grandfather in Judeo-Tunisian Arabic.

For more on this work, scroll down to the "More Like This" section.