

## How Museums Aim to Stop Food-Throwing, Climate-Change Protesters

After months of watching climate protesters slather famous paintings in tomato soup or mashed potatoes, stunned museums are fighting back



Photo: Handout/Last Generation/AFP via Getty Images

By [Kelly Crow](#)

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Museums are enacting “zero bag” policies, putting prized paintings behind glass and hiring ex-British and Israeli military pros to teach their guards surveillance tactics after a series of climate-change protests have left the world’s most famous art [slathered in mashed potatoes](#) and [tomato](#) or pea soup.

“Museums have always been aware of people trying to steal their art,” said Remigiusz Plath, head of infrastructure and security for Germany’s Hasso Plattner Foundation, whose Claude Monet “Grainstacks” recently got doused in [mashed potatoes](#) at Potsdam’s Barberini Museum. Glass helped protect the Monet. But warding off vandals wielding groceries who claim they don’t want to damage the art, he said, “That threat is definitely new.”

On Friday, Germany’s Last Generation activists were back at it, sloshing pea soup on Vincent Van Gogh’s 1888 “The Sower” at Rome’s Palazzo Bonaparte. Paris’s Orsay Museum said it foiled an Oct. 27 attempt by a Just Stop Oil activist to throw soup on one of its paintings.

Both canvases were protected behind glass, but museums say they’re getting fed up. Amotz Brandes, a former member of the Israeli military, said museums are enlisting his California security consulting and training firm, Chameleon Associates, to learn counter-maneuvers. One tactic he suggests: Watch for visitors who show up solo yet start communicating with others once inside using nonverbal gestures, like pointing.

“It’s all about early detection,” Mr. Brandes said.



Just Stop Oil activists papered over John Constable's bucolic scene, 'The Hay Wain,' with their own dystopian version in London this summer.

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One of the art world's strangest showdowns is pitting museums against environmental activists who since spring have smuggled in and tossed all sorts of foodstuffs onto some of the world's most famous artworks. Protesters say such actions draw attention to the doomsday effects of climate change. Curators complain the world's masterpieces are being endangered as political pawns.

Activists have long come to museums to advocate for everything from women's voting rights to nuclear disarmament, sometimes violently. In 1914, suffragette [Mary Richardson](#) used a meat cleaver to hack into Diego Velázquez's "The Toilet of Venus" at London's National Gallery, compelling repairs. The Louvre Museum's "Mona Lisa" weathered red spray paint and an acid-throwing attempt decades before this May when a man disguised as an old woman smeared cake frosting on the glass covering Leonardo da Vinci's portrait, telling onlookers to think of the planet's welfare.

### **The Creeping Cost of Keeping Art Safe**

Protesters today vow they don't want to harm the art, but the latest round of vandalism comes as museums are already struggling to rebuild their coffers, staffing and attendance levels since the pandemic. Redoubling security measures now could prove too costly.

Robert Wittman, a former art-crime investigator at the Federal Bureau of Investigation who said he keeps in touch with museum security personnel, said most museums can't stretch their current budgets to quickly hire more guards or install noticeable security measures like metal detectors, which wouldn't detect food, anyway. In Europe, where the food-related attacks have so far taken place, Mr. Wittman said guards rarely even check visitors' bags. Food is often allowed on museum grounds so visitors can have picnics.



In July, five Just Stop Oil activists spray painted the wall in front of Giampietrino's 16th century copy of Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' and glued their hands to its frame at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Plath agreed, saying the "zero bag" policy and mandatory coat checks he instituted last week at the Barberini after the Monet incident remain largely "unheard of" elsewhere in Germany.

For now, more museums are turning to the kinds of security consulting firms that typically work with major sporting venues or airports to teach their museum guards ways to spot suspicious activity.

Mr. Brandes at Chameleon said he's tested more than a dozen museums by sending in what he calls "red teams," or role-playing protesters, to mill around galleries scouring for security cameras, he said, or head straight to a famous painting and then leave rather than strolling around afterward like a regular tourist might. He coaches museum guards to eye such activities more closely.

Andy Davis, managing director of U.K.-based security consulting firm Trident Manor Ltd., said such proactive protocols remain "patchy" at smaller museums, where security may be overseen by an administrator with retail experience, not law enforcement. "Everyone wants to think it won't happen to them," Mr. Davis said.



Vincent van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' was hit with tomato soup in October.  
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

## A Grocery's Worth of Weapons? Cake, Soup, Glue and More

Security firms say the Louvre is widely hailed for having Europe's toughest museum security protocols including bag checks, but its guards still weren't able to stop the cake-smearing man in May, and incidents have only accelerated since.

In August, protesters used glue to affix themselves to treasures including the Vatican's marble "Laocoön and His Sons." [Vincent Van Gogh's "Sunflowers"](#) was hit with tomato soup on Oct. 14. (The bouquet was protected behind glass, but its frame was slightly damaged.) On Oct. 27, a man tried gluing his own head to the glass covering Johannes Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" at the same time as a peer poured soup on him at The Hague's Mauritshuis. The dinosaur displays at Berlin's Natural History Museum were targeted on Oct. 30.

"Art is defenseless," the Mauritshuis said after the Vermeer dousing.

Each of these incidents has sparked a social-media uproar. After Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" got souped, rapper Lil Nas X responded with an [Instagram](#) meme in which he appeared to throw an image of the painting onto an Andy Warhol silk-screen of a tomato-soup can. In the caption, the rapper said he was avenging Van Gogh.

Heavyweights like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles aren't divulging their battle plans for fear of putting their art under an unwanted spotlight—but curators and environmental activists agree that U.S. museums will be targeted, eventually.

## The Hollywood Connection

Hollywood is already playing a role in funding the climate activist groups behind the global food fight. Arguably the highest-profile entity donating millions to protesters now is Beverly Hills's Climate Emergency Fund, an umbrella-like fundraising nonprofit supported by "Don't Look Up" director Adam McKay and co-founded in 2019 by Aileen Getty, a philanthropist and granddaughter of oil tycoon J. Paul Getty.

Mr. McKay declined through his publicist to comment, but when he joined the fund's board in September he said he admired its "civil, nonviolent, disruptive activism." The climate fund confirmed the director has donated \$1 million and pledged another \$3 million to the fund.

Ms. Getty, in an email, said she has no say or sway over the groups' disruptions but only allows the fund's moneys to be used for legal activities. She confirmed that her namesake foundation initially gave \$1 million to co-found the climate fund, which in the past year has given out \$4.6 million to 43 activist groups such as Just Stop Oil.

She said the climate fund's moneys can be used to help recruit and train protesters but can't be used to pay for any illegal, soup-throwing activities.

The fund said its donations also can't be used to cover any legal bills for protesters after museum incidents, including the two protesters in the "Sunflowers" case who were [later charged](#) with causing criminal damage. A Just Stop Oil spokesperson said the pair didn't hurt the art; they pleaded not guilty.



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PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Ms. Getty, a self-taught artist whose grandfather founded the Getty museum, said it matters to her that protesters are intentionally targeting pieces behind glass, lessening the risk of causing any lasting damage. "These actions have struck a nerve in society by targeting something beautiful that we love," she said. "The risk of such an action is turning off people who support the message but not the tactic."

Even so, she said, "This is not about attacking art. This is about sounding the alarm to protect life on this planet."



On Friday, Germany's Last Generation activists splashed pea soup on Vincent Van Gogh's 1888 'The Sower' and glued their hands to the nearby wall at Rome's Palazzo Bonaparte.  
PHOTO: ANSA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A Getty museum spokeswoman said it has no official ties to its namesake family anymore, including Ms. Getty.

Philadelphia paintings conservator Steven Erisoty said art behind glass can still get damaged, particularly if canvases sit in century-old frames outfitted with felt-covered wood or plastic spacers or other elements that may hold an artwork still—but rarely vacuum-seal it.

But it's the glue being used in some protests that spooks Mr. Erisoty. One slip-up involving a painting not behind glass, and "that's the nightmare scenario," he said.

Mr. Plath said he's rushing to put more of the Barberini's pieces behind glass in part because he thinks [activists](#) will take increasingly drastic measures to stay in the public eye, adding, "It's the escalation that worries me."

Margaret Klein Salamon, the climate fund's executive director, said activists aren't trying to drive museums crazy. Earlier actions like gluing themselves to fuel tankers or protesting in front of oil terminals just never captured the same amount of attention. "Frankly, this is the thing that's worked," she said.

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