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Chair on Threats to Cultural Heritage
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Commentary

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Climate Vandalism as a Threat to Cultural Expression

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In the last months, we notice phenomena of vandalism occurring with increasing frequency in cultural institutions as a form of climate activism. In most cases, the protesters threw liquids over famous paintings or glued themselves to artworks. Recent attacks by activists to museums and galleries, such as the National Gallery in London, the Leopold Museum in Vienna, the Prado in Madrid, and the Mauritshuis Museum in the Hague, have raised concerns and attracted publicity around the globe. The most recent attack to Mona Lisa by the environmental group “Riposte Alimentaire” (Food Counterattack), which threw soup at the glass-protected Leonardo da Vinci’s painting at the Louvre, sparked again the discussion.

Attacks on works of art do not constitute a new phenomenon that museums have to deal with; there have been similar acts in history, such as the attack with a hammer on the Michelangelo’s sculpture Pietà in 1972, or the graffiti on Picasso’s Guernica in 1974. Of course, since these incidents, measures have been taken so as to protect the artworks from such attacks. However, as the history shows, even from the Byzantine Iconoclasm (726–87; 814–42), the art has been systematically targeted as a tool of communication to spread a message that has nothing to do with the art per se.

As for the climate activism, instead of resorting to vandalism, there are many other ways for individuals and groups to raise awareness about climate change and advocate for policies that address this important issue. Some examples might include participating in peaceful protests, writing letters or making phone calls to elected officials, supporting organizations that are working on climate issues, and engaging in educational and outreach efforts to raise awareness about the importance of addressing climate change.



Activists throw tomato soup on Van Gogh's Sunflowers at National Gallery in 2022 (The Guardian)

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many people who are passionate about addressing climate change may feel a sense of urgency and frustration about the need for action. Nevertheless, people who may be sympathetic to the cause are more likely to support protests that adhere to social norms, such as peaceful gatherings and petitions. These vandalism incidents cause harm that extends beyond the paintings themselves. In order to prevent damage, open access to public collections may be restricted given that the activists are focusing on well-known artworks in galleries. As a result, although the activists groups aim to shed light on climate change, such actions eventually have a negative impact on people's willingness to support these groups by alienating public opinion.

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Facing these new threats, artworks should be preserved from damage to ensure that they can be accessed and appreciated by future generations. The paintings have historical, cultural and aesthetic value, which is important to be kept for the understanding of the past and the evolution of the humanity. Art is a way to express our inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences and can also help to bridge existing cultural gaps and promote the understanding of different societies and traditions, especially in times of crisis, such as those that we are living through now.

On the contrary, arts can be used as a creative and interactive tool to promote climate change education and engagement, as they create new concepts and offer a wider space for solutions, beyond the mainstream educational methods. Due to the diverse potential of the arts, climate change can be integrated into the curricula and help develop adequate educational practices regarding climate change via an interdisciplinary approach.

To conclude with, it goes without saying that vandalism is a criminal act that can harm both people and public or private property, and it does not help to put pressure on political factors, let alone address climate change. Everyone has the freedom to express their ideas, but this cannot be done at the expense of other people's ideas and artistic expression. Besides, the protection policies do not constitute a battlefield; the protection and the exhibition of a cultural good does not degrade the protection of the environment or produce any externalities for the climate. It is important to note that, while peaceful protests are a fundamental right, acts of vandalism or violence, including the destruction of cultural heritage, should be condemned. Therefore, it is important to separate these things, find ways to properly protect all the fields that are threatened by the human practices and for the protesters to express their grievances through peaceful means. The respect to cultural heritage constitutes an indication of an educated society and the only way to preserve that history for future generations.