



Preserving 5,000 years of Gaza's history through rescued treasures at the Arab World Institute in Paris

The Arab World Institute's exhibition on Gaza's archaeological treasures offers European visitors a vital glimpse into the history of the Palestinian enclave

[Culture](#)

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“Gaza has long been denied a sense of history,” says Elodie Bouffard, curator of the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris.

“History can be accepted everywhere, but this area is completely swept away, ahistorical.”

It is undeniable that any time we think about [Gaza](#) after October 2023, it's hard to think about anything else other than the devastating human loss that has been unfolding in real time. Contemporary havoc leaves little space for historical pondering.

However, Elodie Bouffard, who coordinated the exhibition [Trésors sauvés de Gaza — 5000 ans d'histoire](#) — *Treasures Saved from the Gaza Strip* with a team of specialists, is convinced that it's important to offer European visitors a glimpse into the history of this Palestinian enclave.

“Humanitarian aid is the priority,” says Elodie. “At the same time, it's important to preserve heritage in terms of history, culture and knowledge that could be lost forever.”

Elodie says that as soon as the [ceasefire](#) was announced, the Institute felt it was high time to talk about the history of this area, but the resumption of Israel's genocide after the ceasefire “filled our urgency.”

UNE EXPOSITION EXCEPTIONNELLE
À L'INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE

TRÉSORS SAUVÉS
DE GAZA
5000 ANS D'HISTOIRE

DU 3 AVRIL AU 2 NOVEMBRE 2025



'Rescued Treasures of Gaza: 5000 Years of History' exhibition poster [Instagram @[institutdumondearabe](https://www.instagram.com/institutdumondearabe)]

A longstanding commitment to Palestine

The show is somewhat of a continuation of a previous exhibition, [What Palestine Brings to the World](#), that took place just when Israel began its war in Gaza in 2023.

While that exhibition focused more on the contemporary element, *Trésors Sauvés de Gaza* — which runs from April to November 2, 2025 — themes around preserving heritage during war.

Visitors are invited to explore the historical landscape of a region that is overshadowed by an ongoing genocide, continuous conflict and systematically erased by [colonial violence](#).

Through a collection of artefacts spanning millennia, the exhibition highlights the ingenuity and craftsmanship of the different civilizations that have shaped Gaza's cultural identity, as well as its dialogue with the Mediterranean.

Each piece tells a story of human creativity and the enduring spirit of a people determined to preserve their heritage amidst adversity.



'Rescued Treasures of Gaza: 5,000 Years of History' highlights the theme of preserving heritage during times of war [Getty]



The exhibition showcases artefacts spanning millennia, reflecting Gaza's cultural heritage and its connection to the Mediterranean [Getty]

Indeed, the pieces in the show come mainly from the [Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève](#), which since 2007 has stored over 500 works belonging to the [Palestinian National Authority](#), artefacts that have been unable to return to their homeland.

A part of this collection belonged to a private collector, Jawdat Khoudary, whose main collection in northern Gaza, which included Christian and Byzantine core, was bulldozed down during the war.

Support from organisations such as Première Urgence Internationale, ALIPH, and L'Œuvre d'Orient has been instrumental in enhancing the project's visibility and communication.

The exhibition is a chronological journey through the ages, curated to highlight the diverse epochs that have shaped Gaza's cultural identity.

From the Bronze Age to the great Muslim dynasties, the collection encompasses millennia of human creativity and innovation, with craftsmanship at its core: "What we are showcasing are indeed objects, but truly what we are speaking about here is the human element that imbues each piece with significance," an exhibition statement reads.

Curated by the architectural studio AAU Anastas, based between Paris and Bethlem, the presentation, especially in the first section, showcases the pieces with very few display cases to allow viewers close-ups of the work.

"The whole scenography was done on carts. It is as if at any moment you could take the work with you," Elodie reveals.

“This raises the question of uprooting and exile because the pieces look like they are anchored nowhere, constantly on the move. We wanted this kind of a frontal approach. We're in a completely raw relationship with the work itself.”

Gaza as a crossroad of civilisations

One of the standout pieces in the exhibition is a magnificent mosaic from a 6th-century church, a Byzantine masterpiece that exemplifies Gaza's historical importance as a cultural crossroads.

Measuring an impressive six by three metres, the mosaic design features local fauna, such as sheep, alongside exotic animals like elephants, leopards, and giraffes, identifying Gaza's role as a hub of trade and cultural exchange: "Around 500, the king of Ethiopia sends a very large caravan to give gifts to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius. These depictions on the mosaic speak of the big crossroads which was Gaza, a meeting point of civilizations," the text explains.



The mosaic floor of a Byzantine church in Gaza [Getty]

Elodie also recounts the story of its discovery, which was quite outstanding: "This mosaic, quite simply, was discovered by a farmer. It was only 20 cm of sand in the middle of his field, in 1998."

This is not the only discovery that happened by chance, as each artefact in the exhibition carries with it the stories of those who discovered, preserved, and cherished them.

Elodie shares the tale of a fisherman who found a marble statue of [Aphrodite](#) – a small piece presenting splendid drapery, and just handed it to a collector: “There is a human story woven into each of the work It also tells some spectacular human stories. When a work is saved from trafficking, from destruction, is because someone has made a choice.”

As for the statue, the interesting element is that there has never been marble in Gaza, so the statue is an export, probably realised by a local craftsman of exceptional skills.

"This piece speaks also of exchanges with the Greek and Hellenic work, and the presence of temples, such as Aphrodite's temple. This is a lesser-known story of Gaza."

Heritage during wartime

The exhibition also confronts the challenges of preserving heritage in times of conflict and violence, a reality that is all too familiar in Gaza.

"We have one section of the show dedicated to historical sites like the Omari Mosque, the Church of Saint Porphyre, the Pasha's Palace. We tried documenting more than eight sites, based on the current knowledge we have of their state of damage, destruction, or the fact that they have been protected," Elodie explained.



The exhibition runs from 3 April to 2 November, 2025 [Getty]

In the second section of the exhibition, we find 3D reconstructions of three sites to give visitors an idea of the scale of the buildings.

"According to UNESCO figures, there are around 350 known sites," Elodie continues. "More than 150 of these have been assessed to date, and of these 150, more than 94 have suffered damage ranging from slight to very serious."

Working with a group of French, Swiss, and Palestinian academics, the exhibition provides rare documentation of the state of damage, destruction, and protection of sites in Gaza. The academics have cross-referenced satellite data and feedback from the field to get a better idea of the impact that Israel's brutal genocide is having on Gaza's heritage.

"The exhibition is a reminder of the fragility of cultural heritage in conflict zones and the pressing need for preservation efforts," Elodie says.

“Our work is really about opening up debates, making people curious, asking questions. And in that respect, to give Gaza back its history, which had been systematically swept away by decades of war,” she adds.

"We felt that putting a bit of thought back into all this would also serve to reflect on the future of the Gaza Strip itself."

Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author of Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione and The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage