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Exhibitions

Thieves Steal the Artist Maurizio Cattelan's Solid Gold Toilet in an Audacious Heist at Blenheim Palace

As fears grow the 18-karat gold work of art could be melted down, the Italian artist says the robbery is "deadly serious" and not a prank.

Javier Pes, September 15, 2019



Installation view of Maurizio Cattelan's *America* (2016) in "Victory is Not an Option" at Blenheim Palace, 2019. Photo by Tom Lin.

British police have arrested a man after burglars stole Maurizio Cattelan's solid gold toilet from Blenheim Palace. The conceptual work of art, reportedly worth around \$5 million, is still missing 24 hours after the daring heist, leading to fears that the 18-karat gold work might be melted down.

A gang of thieves broke into the stately home near Oxford the night after Cattelan's *America* (2016) had gone on display to the public. Police confirmed in a statement that the thieves had made their getaway by 4:50 a.m. on Saturday morning, having removed the high-value, heavy weight, and fully functioning work of art. It had been plumbed into the water closet once used by Winston Churchill.

The audacious theft will also cause red faces at Blenheim Palace and the Blenheim Art Foundation, which organized the Italian artist's first solo show in the UK. Cattelan corrected speculation that the theft was a hoax. "I wish it was a prank," he told the *New York Times*, adding that the robbery is "deadly serious if even a little bit surreal."

The chief executive of Blenheim Palace, Dominic Hare, said in a statement: "We hope against hope" that *America* can be recovered.

Thames Valley Police confirmed that a 66-year-old man has been arrested in connection with the theft, and that he remains in custody. In a statement, Blenheim Palace said that it was relieved that no one was hurt during the robbery. The thieves did cause significant flooding when they removed toilet, however, and Blenheim Palace remained shut yesterday, September 14. It is due to reopen today. The extent of the damage to the historic interior of water closet near Churchill's bedroom, and rooms beneath it, is unclear.



Installation view, *Victory is Not an Option* (2019), Maurizio Cattelan at Blenheim Palace, 2019.
Photo by Tom Lindboe.

The thieves would have had the past six months to plan the robbery as the arrival of Cattelan's *America*, the highlight of the exhibition, "Victory Is Not an Option," was first announced in May. This has increased fears that the sculpture could be melted down. The gang used two vehicles to carry out the robbery, and remove the heavy toilet.

Ahead of Cattelan's exhibition, Edward Spencer-Churchill, who is the founder of the Blenheim Art Foundation and the half-brother of the Duke of Marlborough, appeared relaxed about the risks of borrowing such a valuable work of art. He told *The Sunday Times* newspaper the *America* would not be "the easiest thing to nick."

A spokesperson for the art foundation declined to say whether the piece was commercially insured. Blenheim Palace's security would have had met national art museum standards to qualify for the UK government indemnity scheme.

Cattelan's exhibition is the latest in a series of annual interventions by leading artists at Blenheim Palace, Churchill's birthplace, which has been the home of the dukes of Marlborough since the 18th century. Previous exhibitions have included solo shows by Jenny Holzer, Ai Weiwei, and Yves Klein, but none have generated the level of publicity caused by the theft of the Italian artist's gold toilet.

Blenheim CEO Dominic Hare drew cold comfort from the theft, saying in his statement: "We hope that the wonderful work of our dear friend Maurizio Cattelan becomes immortalized by this stupid and pointless act."