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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Hidden Stories: Treasures from the Collections

Weltmuseum Wien, 17.09.2026 [ENA]

Hidden Stories: Treasures from the Collections at the Weltmuseum Wien is an exhibition of rare intelligence and ethical sensitivity. Rather than presenting the museum's holdings as a triumphal catalogue of "world cultures," it reveals collections as living, contested archives—formed through craft, exchange, migration, colonial acquisition, scholarship, and the ongoing work of interpretation.

Running from 16 September 2026 to 30 May 2027, the exhibition brings together three seemingly disparate areas—hair ornaments, stone sculpture, and contemporary art from Pakistan—in a compelling meditation on what objects can tell us, and what they continue to withhold. The exhibition's greatest achievement is its insistence that material artefacts possess biographies. A comb, a carved figure, or a painting is never only a discrete aesthetic object. Each bears traces of its maker, original use, cultural setting, routes of circulation, collectors, dealers, and the institutional frameworks that eventually brought it into a European museum.

This approach is particularly important for ethnographic collections, whose histories are frequently inseparable from unequal systems of colonial power and knowledge production. The first section, devoted to combs and hairpins from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, makes this argument through objects of disarming intimacy. Hair ornaments are easily overlooked because they belong to the everyday world of grooming. Yet the exhibition demonstrates their considerable symbolic density: they may signal beauty, status, belonging, gender, spirituality, ritual distinction, or personal memory.

Fashioned from bone, horn, ivory, shell, wood, silk, and precious metals, they bridge the categories that European museums have too often separated—utility and art, ornament and identity, domestic life and ceremonial practice. A Japanese hairpin of 1889 from the Heinrich von Siebold Collection is a particularly eloquent example. Its elaborate composition of bone, silk, gold thread, and silver sheet speaks of painstaking technical skill, but it also raises questions about the international networks of collecting through which such personal objects came to Vienna.

The inclusion of multimedia elements encourages visitors to relate these historical artefacts to their own practices of self-presentation and care, making this section both scholarly rigorous and quietly affecting. The exhibition's centre of gravity lies in Stone by Stone: Tracing Histories, which considers nine stone sculptures from the Americas and Asia, most acquired in the nineteenth century. These works—including an Aztec volcanic-stone Rattlesnake of around 1500 CE, a Gandharan Buddha of the second or third

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century, and a twelfth-century Khmer representation of Lokeshvara—were once connected to religious, ritual, or architectural contexts before entering museum storage.

Their visual presence is undoubtedly powerful, but the exhibition’s ethical strength lies in declining to treat their beauty as sufficient. It asks where the objects came from, who removed or transmitted them, what documentation was lost, and what responsibilities now arise from incomplete histories. By incorporating archival materials, sources, and research findings that may be added, revised, or corrected during the exhibition’s run, the Weltmuseum makes provenance research visible as an unfinished process rather than a finished institutional statement. That openness is exemplary.

The third section introduces paintings, drawings, and prints donated to the museum in 2018 from the Brigitte Neubacher Collection and now shown publicly for the first time. The works trace developments in Pakistani contemporary art from the 1980s onward, a period marked by intense social and political transformation. Many of the participating artists were educated at Lahore’s National College of Arts, where the historic vocabulary of miniature painting became a fertile resource for radically contemporary practice.

Quddus Mirza’s Portrait of an Angel with Red Wings (1994) is among the most striking works. Its apparently naïve or childlike visual language gradually unfolds as a meditation on political tension and social experience. Alongside works such as Salima Hashmi’s A Poem for Zainab IV and Anwar Saeed’s Spy in the Sky, it expands the exhibition’s scope beyond the historical artefact and insists that ethnographic museums must also engage with living, self-reflective artistic cultures.

Designed by Martina Berger of Studio Nägel mit Köpfen, Hidden Stories is attentive to slow looking. Visitor prompts invite reflection not only on what one sees but also on what remains unknown, while a dedicated video offers access to the normally invisible world of storage, documentation, and research. This is an exhibition that earns its title. Its “hidden stories” are not sensational revelations but layers of human experience, craftsmanship, displacement, memory, and incomplete knowledge. The Weltmuseum Wien has created a thoughtful, visually engaging, and morally alert exhibition that transforms the museum from a repository of objects into a place of questions—precisely where an ethnographic museum should begin.

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