

The Met Origins

A Spatial Discovery Interface for Connecting Audiences to Museum Objects Through Space and Time

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CONTEXT

The journey you can't see

Museums organize collections by department, medium, and period. So the geographic origin, and the journeys its objects took to arrive, stay invisible to the people standing in front of them.



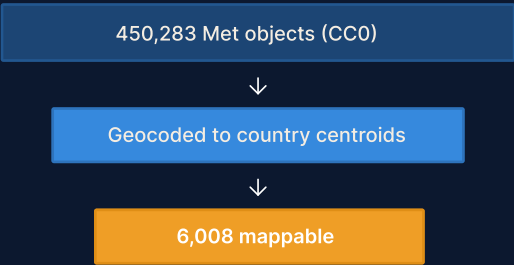
Made in Paris, c. 1245. Now in The Met, New York. The object's journey is the question.

RESEARCH QUESTION

"What concentrations, absences, and journeys become visible when the objects in a museum collection are mapped by where and when they originated, that gallery-based browsing leaves hidden?"

DATA PIPELINE

From text fields to a globe



DATASET
6,008 objects from The Met's open-access Collection API (CC0).

DATA PROCESSING
Free-text origin fields were matched to countries and placed at country centroids.

TOOLS
Next.js, React, react-globe.gl (Three.js), Python for data pipeline.

LIMITATIONS

Where the metadata runs out

Only 1.3% of records carried mappable origin data, and 21 objects had reconstructable journeys which is a metadata constraint, not an interface one.

INTERFACE

A museum collection has a geography. Here's the Met's.

The Met Origins is a web-based interactive that maps 6,008 of the Met's objects to where they were made. Spin it, filter five millennia, trace a single object's route to New York.



Density made visible
A hex-bin heatmap encodes concentration through height and a blue-to-gold ramp. Regional disparities read at a glance.

3000 BC ————— 2025 AD

Time made explorable
A dual-handle slider spans 3000 BC to 2025 AD. Its track is a density histogram, so you see where the collection clusters in time before you filter.

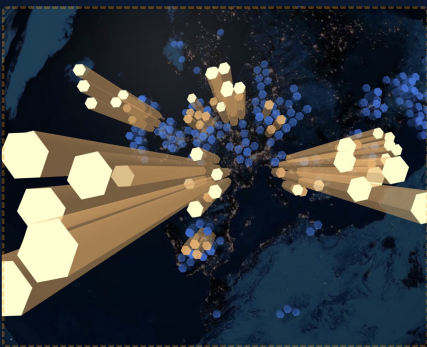
Journeys made discoverable
Click an object and its documented provenance animates as arcs from origin to The Met. A 'Surprise Me' fly-in turns discovery into an invitation.

VISUALIZATION DECISIONS

One dataset, two encodings that make the structure perceptible



Points view



Hex-bin density view

FINDINGS

The shape the map surfaces

Mapped spatially, the Met's collection concentrates in three regions: Western Europe (45%), North America (18.5%), and Egypt and the Ancient Near East (15.2%). Together they account for nearly four-fifths of the mappable collection.

Western Europe	2,726 (45%)
North America	1,113 (18.5%)
Egypt & Ancient Near East	911 (15.2%)
Other / Unmapped	519 (8.6%)
East Asia	324 (5.4%)
South America	169 (2.8%)
South Asia	120 (2.0%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	53 (0.9%)
Southeast Asia	47 (0.8%)
Oceania	17 (0.3%)
Central Asia	9 (0.1%)

This is the shape of the Met's collection and its acquisition history, not of world art history. The same interface on another museum's data would surface a different shape.

PROVENANCE

A documented journey



Crown of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (Crown of the Andes)

Ca. 1660 (diadem) and Ca. 1770 (arches)

ORIGIN
Colombia

DEPARTMENT
The American Wing

A documented ownership chain, not a narrative claim.



Scan to spin the globe yourself.

Built on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's open access collection (CC0). An independent, attribution-respecting project, not an official Met product.

REFERENCES

[1] Windhager et al. Visualization of cultural heritage collection data. IEEE TVCG, 2019. [2] Mayr et al. Visualization of cultural heritage data for casual users. VIS4DH, 2016. [3] Whitelaw. Generous interfaces for digital cultural collections. DHQ, 2015. [4] Shneiderman. The eyes have it. IEEE Symp. Visual Languages, 1996. [5] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met Collection API (CC0). metmuseum.github.io