

Arts

September 29, 2026

“Broken: The Power of the Fragment” Exhibit at Florence’s Palazzo Strozzi

The show explores the enduring fascination of the fragment from Ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman archaeology to contemporary art

*Italian Hours*

Lucy Gordan



The Elephant in the Room (2023) by Julius von Bismarck, Photo by Roman März, Courtesy of Julius von Bismarck

On until January 24, 2027, at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence is “Broken: The Power of the Fragment”. The exhibition explores the evocative power and enduring fascination of the fragment throughout the history of sculpture from Ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman archaeology to contemporary art by Alberto Giacometti, Francesco Vezzoli, Dahn Vo, and Paul Pfeiffer, among others.

Organized with the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where the exhibition will be shown again from March 13 to June 27, 2027, “Broken” brings together more than 80 artifacts on loan from 50 lenders on 5 continents. These include prestigious international museums: the Met, the Louvre, the British Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City.



Fragments of the Funerary Monument of Margaret of Brabant (1312-14) by Giovanni Pisano. Photo credit: Photo Scala, Firenze

The artifacts aren't displayed in chronological order, but in nine thematic sections: Faces, Bodies, Iconoclasm, War and Colonialism, Nature, The Reassembled (not Restored) Body (so often the sculptures here were created with their parts assembled from different broken original sculptures), Dahn Vo, Sculpting the Fragment, and ending with a large room of works by American sculptor Paul Pfeiffer, whose wooden installations of global icon Justin Bieber's separate body parts, entitled Incarnator, imply Christ's Crucifixion. Each section explores the causes that have led some sculptures to be broken or damaged, some reassembled, and some created purposely unfinished or broken.

“Broken”s' logo is the limestone ancient Egyptian nose and lips of the infamous pharaoh Akhenaten, the father of Tutankhamon, dating to 1353-1336 BC, on loan from the Met; his face destroyed by his political enemies to erase him from history. The oldest artifact is approximately two hundred reassembled gabbro fragments of an Akkadian (Mesopotamian) Torso



Nose and lips of Akhenaten. New Kingdom, Amarna Period. Dynasty 18, reign of Akhenaten, ca. 1353-1336 B.C. From Egypt, Middle Egypt, el-Amarna (Akhetaten); inc. el-Hagg Qandil, Great Temple of the Aten, pit outside southern wall, Petrie/Carter 1891-1892. Indurated limestone. H. 8.1 cm (3 3/16 in.); W. 6.3 cm (2 1/2 in.); D. 5.5 cm (2 3/16 in.). Purchase, Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1926 (26.7.1395)

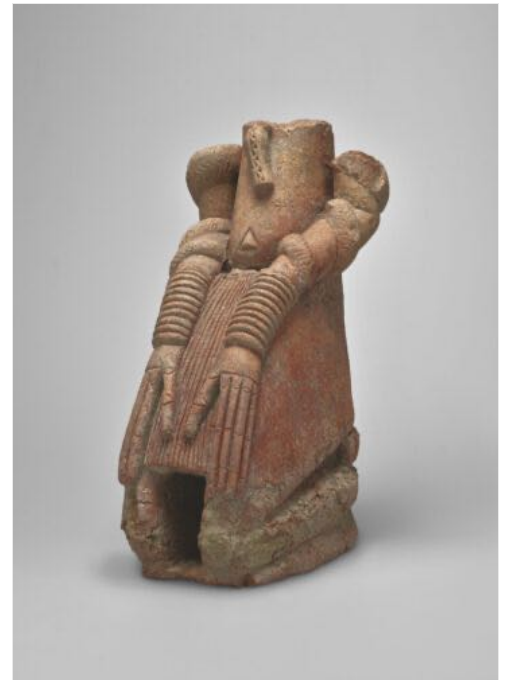
of a Ruler, dating to 2300-2250 BC, and also probably destroyed by his political enemies. The most recent is a new installation by the Dutch Belgian-Belgian sculptor Mark Manders, designed specifically for Palazzo Strozzi's Renaissance Courtyard, of a colossal bronze Tilted Head intentionally created split in half.

Other highlights include works by three of art history's greatest sculptors: Giovanni Pisano's fragmented marble Funerary Monument of Margaret of Brabant (1312-14), demolished in 1805 along with the Genovese church where she was buried, which opens the exhibition; Michelangelo, who sometimes purposely left his works unfinished, like his terracotta Model of a Nude Woman here (1553); and Rodin, whose bronze "Walking Man" (1903) combines his unfinished torso with a pair of legs, but deliberately lacks a head and arms.

Still other highlights are a kneeling terracotta figure from Mali (c.1000-1400 AD), which may have been fragmented for ritual reasons or amidst religious change across the western Sahel; Antonio Canova's bust of Catholic Religion (1815), damaged by artillery fire during World War I; the restored medieval wooden Christ Carrying the Cross, badly damaged during the 1966

flood in Florence; Francesco Vezzoli's Swan (2023), which combines the marble head of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius atop a late-16th century armless female bust; and Julius von Bismarck's enormous Elephant in the Room (2023), a spoof of the equestrian statues of the ancient Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and of the sculptor's great-great-great-great-uncle German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-98), located in Bremen. It seems intact, but can gradually collapse and later straighten up, revealing that the bodies are separated into sections.

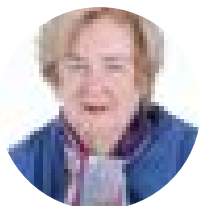
"Broken" invites us to observe these fragments, freeing them from the idea of loss. The fragment is not only what remains of an original work, but an autonomous one, capable of preserving traces of history, memory, and transformation. Andrew Sears, assistant curator of northern European paintings at Washington's National Gallery of Art and curator of "Broken"- with C.D. Dickerson, Dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts- said at the press preview: "For very often, the fragment has lasted much longer than its original sculpture. Usually, art exhibitions concern a single artist or place, instead, 'Broken', offering an unusual and unique concept, is groundbreaking."



Fragment of a Kneeling Figure ca. 1001-1400 CE. Niger Delta, Mali. Terracotta. 48 x 23 x 26 cm (18 15/16 x 9 1/16 x 10 1/4 in.). Maurice D. Galleher, Ada Turnbull Hertle, and Laura R. Magnuson funds. 1983.917.

Share on Facebook

Share on Twitter



Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatican