The Bright and Dark Sides of Gold

This is the time of year when living rooms and entire cities are bathed in golden light. The subject of this year's winter exhibition at the Museum der Kulturen Basel is gold. It highlights both its bright and dark sides.

Opulence and splendour, gleam and glamour: for centuries people around the world have adorned themselves gold. Its shine stands for power, status, and veneration. The best are awarded gold medals and golden statuettes. Elegant packaging, even emergency foils come in gold.

Upon entering the exhibition GOLD at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, visitors will find themselves swept up in a gold rush, engulfed by shining clothes, jewellery, and ornaments, from the Bronze Age to today. Gold weights and scales allude to the value of gold which has long been, and remains, a key commodity in trade, prized for its enduring value.

And gold makes an ideal gift. 'During the preparation for the exhibition, I stumbled across gifts of gold time and again,' says curator Tabea Buri. The Three Wise Men – nativity figures feature prominently in the exhibition – presented Baby Jesus with gold. Gold also served as an offering and was placed in graves as a mortuary gift.

Artistic Restitution
However, the precious metal also sparks dark desires. Graves were often plundered. Gold mining – illustrated in the exhibition by gold-panning equipment and photographs – often has a devastating effect on the environment and the people living there. This is also why the title of the show speaks of both the bright and dark sides of gold.

These dark sides are addressed in two impressive works by Colombian artists. The series Rematriation by Estefanía García Pineda evokes the symbolic restitution of sacred and ritual artefacts made of gold still found across many European museums today.

In her video work Fuel to Fire (2023), the artist Carolina Caycedo returns the gold to the waters it was once extracted from, thereby countering the logic of extraction and exploitation with mindfulness and restoration. Her work is the centrepiece of the exhibition and thus granted extensive space because, as curator Tabea Buri emphasizes, 'it perfectly captures the bright and dark sides of gold – and it ties in with all the exhibition's stations and with our life today in general.'

In his series Welsh Emergency Blankets, Daniel Trivedy draws on gold-coloured, foil emergency blankets printed with designs from traditional Welsh woollen blankets. By merging gloss and warmth with flight and migration, he is sending a message calling for open-mindedness and inclusion.

The three artworks in the exhibition link the golden objects on display with the issue of political accountability. Not least in Switzerland, where up to two thirds of the gold traded in the world is refined, the way we handle gold – one of the most valuable resources of all – is an ongoing challenge we need to face up to.

The exhibition opens on 19 November 2026 and runs until 21 March 2027. Images are available for downloading at our website. Details about the artists are to be found in the appendix.