

Museums & Heritage Europe

An aerial view of ancient stones in Carnac, Brittany (main image), and a close-up of the massive pieces of granite, the purpose of which remains unknown

Megalith mystery: newly discovered standing stones in France add pieces to the puzzle

BURIED TREASURES

Garry Shaw, an archaeologist and writer, unearths key findings in the latest research.



Over 6,000 years ago, farmers in Brittany, western France, erected around 3,000 stones in long rows, stretching for more than 4km across what is today the town of Carnac. These builders made sure to place shorter stones at the east side of the arrangement and taller ones to the west, some standing nearly 4m tall, and erected others in the shape of semicircular and rectangular enclosures. They also built hearths beside the stones' irregular granite forms, perhaps for cooking or simply for light, and buried their dead beneath mounds of earth and megalithic tombs across the sacred landscape.

But what did Carnac's mysterious standing stones mean to these early builders? Were they a way of monitoring the movements of the sun and moon? A colossal calendar? Or were they the petrified bodies of soldiers, as one 17th-century legend relates. For archaeologists trying to understand the site, any new piece of the puzzle could help provide an answer.

This mystery has long endured, partly because there has been little excavation at Carnac compared with most archaeological sites of this significance. Individuals conducted sporadic excavations before the 20th century, and even then, except for archaeological investigations from the 1920s to the early 1940s, the aim has mainly been a place to preserve and protect. Its global significance was cemented in 2025 when the Megaliths of Carnac and of the shores of Morbihan were inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list.

Now, writing in the journal *Archaeological Prospection*, Guillaume Brunioux of the archaeological consultancy ArchéoSolution and his colleagues have provided a glimpse into just how much remains to be uncovered at Carnac. Using geophysical techniques to peer beneath the ground, the team



surveyed an area of around 2.5 hectares and revealed the presence of buried standing stones (including short alignments beyond the previously investigated area), burial mounds and cooking stone pits. As well as showing the site to be larger than previously believed, these new discoveries will hopefully provide new insights into the megalith builders.

Monumental mysteries from Orkney to Malta

Similar longstanding mysteries surround megalithic monuments across Europe, from Orkney to Andalusia, and Stonehenge to Malta. Understanding why prehistoric Europeans decided to make such huge stone constructions has long been a goal of archaeologists, and investigations continue to reveal previously unknown sites and works of art.

In southern Spain, for example, a team has recently studied the megalithic necropolises of the Fardes River, according to research published in *Archaeological Prospection*. This vast region is filled



with prehistoric sites, but many remain unrecorded, a problem exacerbated by a difficult terrain filled with valleys and ravines. This led Juan Antonio Cámara Serrano of the University of Granada and



Across Europe, megalith builders left no guide to help us interpret their carved symbols and motifs

his colleagues to survey the area using LiDAR (light detection and ranging) and remotely piloted drones, which allows them to record the landscape from the sky. Using this technology, the team identified 40 anomalies, which they then visited on the ground. Their preliminary conclusions revealed that half of these anomalies were indeed archaeological sites, including burial mounds, stone structures and a fortified settlement.

Meanwhile, a team led by Ivona Dlábková of the Technical University of Ostrava in the Czech Republic has published in the journal *npj Heritage Science* their research into engraved standing stones first discovered in 1988 in the town of Holič, Slovakia, when an apartment building was under construction. Over 40 megaliths were unearthed, of which 21 were later re-erected close to a castle.

Almost all of the megaliths are weathered, so the team used 3D lasergrammetry and other methods on three of the stones to reveal and reconstruct their faded carvings. Two of them stood out: on one stone, a human figure holds a tool; another bears the shape of an animal. Both figures are accompanied by concentric circles. The researchers note that these motifs bear stylistic similarities to Neolithic art found in Italy, France and Scotland. And they conclude that the site may be an overlooked example of Neolithic monumental culture in central Europe – an area where few megalithic monuments have been identified.

Across Europe, the megalith builders left no writing to explain their constructions, no guide to help us interpret their carved symbols and motifs. Their intentions remain obscure. But like chipping away at a massive stone block, each monument discovered and art examined brings us a little closer to understanding their colossal achievements.

ACQUISITIONS

Our pick of the latest gifts and purchases to enter institutional collections worldwide. By Anna Brady

Portrait of Pierre Louis Alexandre (around 1879-80) by Alma Holsteinson

Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)

→ Born in French Guyana, Pierre Louis Alexandre (1844-1905) is one of the most depicted Black models in pre-20th century art. Having stowed away on an American cargo ship, Alexandre arrived in Stockholm in 1863, where he worked at the docks and as a life model at the city's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. It was there that he was painted by the young Swedish artist Alma Holsteinson, likely in the same session as her fellow student Karin Larsson's portrait of Alexandre, which depicts him in the same pose and clothes, acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 2024. The Holsteinson painting was sold at Bukowskis in Stockholm in December 2024 for 760,000 kronor (\$82,200), over seven times the estimate, and has now been purchased by the AGO. Caroline Shields, the curator of European art at the museum, says the acquisition helps progress the museum's aim of "representing a more expansive history of Europe and the global interconnectedness of the African Diaspora".



Portraits of Botho Graef and Hugo Biallowons (1915) by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Jena Kunstsammlung, Germany

→ This double-sided print depicts the archaeologist and art historian Botho Graef (1857-1917) on the front (right) and his partner Hugo Biallowons (1879-1916) to the verso. Graef was a champion of young artists, particularly those of the Brücke group, in the early 20th century. Kirchner was close friends with Graef and Biallowons – after Graef died, Kirchner wrote: "He did me so much good... It feels to me as if my father were dead, more, much more". The print, which has been in a German private collection for 50 years and has been bought using a contribution from the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, was originally in Graef's enormous holdings, to which Kirchner donated 260 woodcuts, lithographs and etchings after the historian's death. The collection was confiscated by the Nazis in 1937 and, deemed "degenerate art", partially destroyed.



RPM (revolutions per minute) (2018) by Jennie C. Jones

Blanton Museum of Art, Austin

→ The University of Texas's Blanton Museum of Art has acquired *RPM (revolutions per minute)*, a 2018 audio work by Jennie C. Jones (right) for its Butler Sound Gallery. Jones, who undertook the 2025 Metropolitan Museum of Art Roof Garden commission



with a sound installation called *Ensemble*, works across paintings, sculpture, installations and audio compositions, and describes her practice as an exploration of "listening as a conceptual act". *RPM* was originally commissioned for The Glass House, the architect Philip Johnson's famous Modernist house in Connecticut, and is a minimalist audio collage, running for nearly four minutes on a loop. It has been acquired for Blanton's outdoor space dedicated to sound art, which was built using a \$5m gift from the Texan philanthropists Sarah and Ernest Butler; the Butler Sound Gallery Endowment also provided the funds to buy Jones's work.