

Press Release

Provenance Research in Germany: Recent Results and Future Outlook

In the case of numerous acquisitions over recent years, the Kulturstiftung der Länder (Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States) has frequently tried the patience not only of art dealers and museum directors, but also of co-funders and allied foundations with stubborn questions relating to the provenance of an artwork or an object. While cooperation was sometimes hesitant at first, the need to clarify the provenance of a desired object has in recent years increasingly become something quite self-evident for museums with collections large and small and in all German federal states. Even if it might have delayed a long-awaited acquisition for months on end, the foundation has always required a precise investigation of whether a Jewish collector had been forced to sell an artwork decades prior, whether he or she had been dispossessed of property, or whether a collector had been forced to abandon the work while in flight. At the latest with the Gurlitt case, arguments are no longer required: we all now know that the consequences of Nazi confiscations and dispossessions remain a significant problem in public collections and the art market. While it was not too long ago that the Kulturstiftung der Länder still had to commission provenance researchers for extensive research in several controversial cases, today clarifying provenance is the first step when a valuable art work or cultural good is to be acquired by a museum, a library, or an archive. All the same, since the discovery of the Schwabing art trove, Germany's approach to Nazi plunder over past decades is now subject to renewed scrutiny: the Federal Government, the states, and affected institutions are accused of not having done enough to clarify the dispossessions resulting from Nazi persecution in a comprehensive fashion.

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The Development of Provenance Research/Establishing the Arbeitsstelle für Provenienzforschung

Until 2008, the landscape of provenance research was marked by individual initiatives. In Cologne and Hamburg, provenance researchers were commissioned early on; they were also the ones to establish the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung (Provenance Research Working Group) with two other colleagues in 2000, forming a network of informal and confidential exchange that today includes over 90 members and confers internationally with colleagues about daily research practice and the requirements for future research. In 2008, systematic investigations of the existing collections began: with a joint effort of the Kulturstiftung der Länder with the Minister of State in the Federal Chancellery and Representative for Cultural and Media Affairs Bernd Neumann, the federal states were able to establish a constant source of funding—with the support of the Berlin Arbeitsstelle für Provenienzforschung (AfP, Office for Provenance Research), which since then, under the auspices of Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, has studied 129 individual

works, also examining the entire holdings of complete institutions. The overall cost of the research AfP was involved in was 13 million euros: in the framework of these projects, the provenance of over 90,000 art works and cultural assets in 67 museums and over a half a million books and prints in 20 libraries was painstakingly examined. At first glance these numbers seem quite respectable, in light of the late start of investigating art looted by the Nazis, and yet these numbers should be relativized in light of recent debate, for among 6,000 German museums, only 285 institutions have actually begun research. But all the same, we need to differentiate here: although a large number of the public collections in Germany do have holdings that could have a problematic origin, many also have a collection profile that does not fulfill the criteria of research for losses due to Nazi persecution: there are many museums whose holdings consist largely of post-war or contemporary art. In the meantime, after five years of work the first promising and sometimes reconciling restitutions have been achieved or, as formulated in the Washington Declaration, “just and fair solutions”: in the meantime, also as a result of the research carried out in projects supported by the AfP, many restitution cases have been settled. According to the Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste (Coordination Office for Lost Cultural Goods) in Magdeburg in over the past 15 years a total of around 12,000 objects, including several large book collections, have been returned to their rightful owners. AfP thus assists public museums, libraries, and archives in the laborious identification of Nazi loot in their collections, thus implementing the principles of the 1998 Washington Conference, where Germany committed itself to seek out art and cultural assets dispossessed by the Nazis and to return them to their rightful owners. As early as 2009, Germany already ranked at the top of the list in fulfilling the Washington Principles in a country comparison carried out to mark the Prague Holocaust Conference, and great progress has been achieved since then with the Arbeitsstelle für Provenienzforschung, the Lost Art Data Bank of the Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste, and projects funded by the federal states such as the Daphne Project of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Seite 2

Examples of Restitutions after Research Projects

In cases such as Otto Dix's painting *Bildnis Max John (Portrait of Max John)* in Freiburg, the work, which had been sold under duress, remained in the collection: the museum was able to reach a settlement with the heirs of art collector Fritz Salo Glaser after long research and extensive negotiations. From Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, two paintings by Karl Schmidt-Rotluff were returned to the heirs of Robert Graetz, Berliner Landesbibliothek restituted a total of 34 books and ex-libris to 30 owners, including the Jüdische Gemeinde and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bremen's Kunsthalle returned Giacomo Cavedone's *Rear Figure of a Woman in a Wrinkled Dress* to the heirs of Michael Berolzheimer, Stiftung Fürst-Pückler-Museum restituted a Carl Blechen painting to the heirs of Alfred and Gertrud Sommerguth, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe returned 43 prints to the nephews of Iwan Moos, Bonner Kunstmuseum was able to purchase Paul Adolf Seehaus' work *Leuchtturm mit rotierenden Strahlen (Lighthouse with Rotating Beams)* with the provenance of Alfred Flechtheim, Museum Wiesbaden was able to

purchase *Two Architectural Pieces* by Gennaro Greco from the heirs, the great granddaughter of Helene and Ignaz Petschek received 420 stolen volumes from Hamburg's Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, art objects from the Munich Stadtmuseum were returned to the heirs of Emma Budge. At Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek, there was a valuable almanac collection that the collector Arthur Goldschmidt had been forced to surrender: here, Kulturstiftung der Länder was able to help to purchase the valuable collection for the Weimar collection. These are but a few examples of the results of research projects: currently, 47 research projects are underway, and each year additional ones will follow. The federal states and local governments will add their own funding to the Federal Government's budget, whatever is necessary to fund the AfP. Whether at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Hamburg's Kunsthalle, or Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, in many places, long-term employees have been looking for loot and cultural assets looted by the Nazis: at many institutions, an exhaustive examination of museum holdings has long been a top priority. Hartwig Fischer, for example, general director of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, emphasized that in the framework of the Daphne project, funded by the Saxon government, systematic provenance research and the investigation of institutional history has taken on a special importance.

Seite 3

Baden-Württemberg was the first federal state to finance provenance research in its state museums completely of its own funds. 28 investigations are currently underway in the southwest of the republic. "We have been investigating our own holdings for a long time, and we do not wait for requests, but rather actively seek out possible contact," according to State Secretary Jürgen Walter. "We will continue this commitment as long as there are eligible heirs."

Outlook: Challenges for Provenance Research

In 2012, the Federal Government significantly raised its funding and has just announced a renewed increase. The Federal States also enhanced their level of financial support, so that in 2013 two additional positions could be established at the AfP. This allows for a more intense advising of the museums, libraries, and archives already in the phase of preparing the projects. The AfP also presents the results and findings achieved in the projects and experiences had in the process. Financial means to employ the experts needed for the research required—who are unfortunately quite hard to find—is far from the only problem. The advisory need continues to be quite high, as shown by a survey of the Institut für Museumsforschung: only every third art museum that participated in the questionnaire is aware of the funding possibilities available at the Berlin office, among folk art and local history museums only every fifth, and the same is true for the museums of natural science and other science and technology museums. The team at the Berlin office is therefore increasingly interested in addressing institutions with potentially questionable holdings, to sensitize them to the need for provenance research and to offer them assistance in preparing their applications. In particular the holdings beyond art museums and in the smaller, municipal collections are still too little in the focus of public debate, as are the objects in the Jewish museums and Judaica collections founded after 1945. For the acquisition of

Judaica after the end of the Nazi dictatorship cannot be separated from the extensive confiscations during this period. In searching for Nazi loot, art stolen and dispossessed from Jewish private collections remains in the foreground, and this is still the primary mission of the AfP. In the course of research, however, other causes for suspicion arose: libraries contain material taken from the libraries of unions and parties banned after 1933, the private holdings of enemies of the regime, and church collections. Only in isolated cases have the art holdings confiscated from members of the resistance after July 20, 1944 been investigated, and the location of art and cultural assets from other persecuted victims like the Sinti and Roma or gays has gone almost entirely unresearched.

We are still far from responding to the injustices committed in a truly comprehensive way. And after the debate about inactive museums and sluggish investigations, now almost all are convinced that the public collections, the Federal Government, federal states, and municipal governments will accept their responsibility to finally return what can still be returned. Yet financial assistance, centrally allocated by the Federal Government and the federal states, will not alone suffice: the task now posed is far too complex. In Germany, provenance research as a discipline is not in such a bad state, also thanks to the network of researchers which has existed now for 13 years: at the moment there are 20 long term positions for provenance researchers and 53 short-term positions for provenance experts at German collections. Thus, many municipal museums and the federal states are already taking their historical and moral responsibility very seriously, acting in accordance with the 1999 “Joint Declaration” (Statement of the German Federal Government, the Länder and the National Associations of Local Authorities regarding on the tracing and return of Nazi-Confiscated Art, Especially with Regard to Jewish Property). As Barbara Kisseler, Hamburg’s Senator for Culture, put it: “In Germany we began far too late with serious provenance research. But since the signing of the Washington Declaration, Hamburger Kunsthalle in particular has taken a leading position in provenance research. The systematic examination of museum collections in light of their provenance will take years. This underscores the fact that the Federal Government and the states can only master this task jointly.”

Promoting Upcoming Scholars and Continuing Training

To ensure that there are enough researchers trained for the enormous tasks at hand, provenance research needs to be permanently anchored in university structures. The existing offerings in provenance training at art history departments like that at Freie Universität Berlin for this special field of work remain too restricted. Looking at the survey of the Institut für Museumsforschung, over 60 percent of the German institutions that participated in the survey hold objects that entered the collections between 1933 and 1945; this means that a workload many times that of what has been achieved until now awaits the researchers, the funders, the associations, Koordinierungsstelle Magdeburg, and the Berlin AfP. To ensure competent research, art historians, historians, archivists, and museologists have to collaborate in interdisciplinary projects to gain the support of large-scale research funding institutions for this subject. It is far from enough, as is still done in some

places due to a lack of qualified employees and missing financing, to send student assistants into this difficult realm for the short term. Complex research can sometimes only be mastered in a collaborative process of academic work.

Seite 5

Expanding the Approach of Museums, Libraries, and Archives/ Networking Research

Of course, the institutions will have to redefine their approach in parallel: the core task of research must expand to include provenance clarification, the core task of public education cannot block out the history of the collections themselves. As some of the institutions have formulated in their grant applications to the AfP, it is necessary to free provenance research from its special role and to understand it as an integral part of museum work, whether retrospectively in researching the holdings, or proactively in new acquisitions or education. The question of how the pictures arrived in the museum meets with resonance among the audience, which has a justified interest in the origin of its public collections (and not just between 1933 and 1945). Until now, only half of the museums that research their collection's provenance have also published their results. And yet, the sources are the most important instrument of the researchers, who conversely profit from the transparent approach of the American museums, for example, or the state commissions for provenance research in the Netherlands or Austria for their own research, for here the research is increasingly reaching new barriers, not only among the museums. The publication of the results is also affected by the barrier of linguistic communication: while the databank Lostart.de in the meantime has become multilingual, internationally the publication of research results in English remains desirable. In addition there are questions relating to the further examination of important sources. But here, thanks to the work of many archives, great progress has been achieved, but the art trade archives in particular, a key source, are still largely inaccessible or unresearched, if they remain extant at all. Information gained must be urgently shared, for provenance research requires not only concentration and time: it also does not take place in isolation or as a one-way street.

The International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property is an impressive example of how this work is being carried out by the large archives internationally and how the AfP can contribute to the study of the sources with targeted funding. The U.S. National Archives, itself the location of one of central holdings for researching the history of art loot, here presents relevant institutions and holdings organized by country. These include Landesarchiv Berlin, which is to provide on line access by August 2014 to the files of the city's recompensation offices. Or Deutsche Kunstarchiv at Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg: here, in collaboration with Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, the archive of an art dealer was completely digitalized and prepared as an archive. This data bank, entitled Galerie Heinemann Online, which went on line in summer 2010, makes available valuable information on artworks from the 19th century in particular. Both projects are funded by the AfP. An additional milestone is a cooperation project of Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles with Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg and Kunstbibliothek – Staatliche

Museen zu Berlin, which since February 2013 has prepared over 3,000 auction catalogs in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland from 1930 to 1945 for researchers and the interested public. Information is also networked by the internal website portal of the AfP: in over 50 areas of emphasis, all project researchers can share their findings and profit from the findings and the expertise of colleagues, opening their results to external researchers in other locations. The expansion of international networking is also on the agenda for the coming years.

Seite 6

As Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen, the general secretary of the Kulturstiftung der Länder, said on the occasion of an informational discussion in Berlin: “Those who in light of the decades of neglect have warned of alarming examples over the past few months, those who placed the museums under general suspicion, overlooking many museum directors who are working towards clearing up the situation, accusing the federal government and the federal states for their inactivity, can now risk taking a closer look: there are sufficient examples of successful ‘just and fair solutions’ and many more urgent tasks ahead in investigating the extent of the injustice of the Nazi art plunder: but we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the descendents of the Jewish collectors have only been indemnified to a small extent for the horrific injustice that their families suffered.”