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Not for dissemination outside of the Conference: “The Preservation of Art and Culture in Times of War,” April 5th Session 4, 3:45-5:00 panel: “Repatriation of and Compensation for Stolen Art and Artifacts”

PREPing Our Way Forward:

World War II-era Provenance Research in Service of Preservation of Cultural Heritage

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Museums have in the past purchased artworks, or been gifted them in good faith, before a troubled history is uncovered. This paper will address some of the developments over the past 20 years of guidelines for, and current trends in, World War II-era provenance research of museum collections. What lessons can we take away, and how might past experience be applied to the current situation in the Middle East?

Provenance research, an established art historical and museum practice, documents the history of the creation and ownership of a work of art, ideally through an unbroken sequence of previous owners and transactions. The perfectly documented object is rare, however. Whether through sale, gift, inheritance, exchange, theft, confiscation, dispossession, or loot, the material evidence of an object’s provenance is often fragmentary or missing altogether. It thus requires ongoing and creative approaches to reconstruct the provenances of objects. The advent of Digital Humanities, enabled by Big Data, encourages the discipline of Art History to expand beyond its traditional bases in connoisseurship and history of collecting to encompass broader fields of study. WWII-era provenance is taking increasing cognizance of other histories, including those of art law and policy, collecting, banking, financial and art markets, and most prominently, the Holocaust.

Since 2000, the Smithsonian Institution has financially supported the work of specialized World War II-era provenance researchers at its museums, and in 2004 it launched the “[Provenance in the World War II-era](#)” website, which includes a publicly searchable object database and other resources.

In 2009, the [Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative \(SPRI\)](#) was founded as a pan-institutional program to advance the Institution’s ongoing, serious commitment to provenance research of its collections, prioritizing World War II losses, and to preserve cultural property and heritage. These aims are integral to the Smithsonian’s mission for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

This paper will address the questions:

1. What is the status of current guidelines and regulations in the U.S. regarding art potentially looted during the National Socialist era?
2. What conditions limit the effectiveness of Nazi-era provenance research in museums?
3. What are the new initiatives that SPRI and others are taking to further the efficacy of the field?
4. What contributions can WWII-era provenance research make in advancing international efforts to respond to new threats to the world’s cultural heritage?

1. BACKGROUND

Let us now back up a moment—to 1997, when the [American Association of Museum Directors \(AAMD\)](#) convened a task force to draft guidelines on how its members should handle art looted by the Nazis and not previously restituted. These guidelines informed the “Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art” drafted by the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets. Forty-four governments and 13 NGOs met to discuss how best to assure that museums conscientiously research the provenance of artworks potentially looted during the National Socialist era, especially citing the advanced ages of survivors of the Holocaust. The Washington Conference’s aim was to discuss Jewish losses in particular, concentrating on painting and sculpture, Judaica, books, and archives.

In May 2001, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) issued a series of guidelines for helping to identify and publish potentially confiscated works held in American museums. In 2003, AAM launched the [Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal](#) (NEPIP) to provide a publically-accessible, searchable central registry of these works and their histories. After 14 years, nearly 30,000 objects from 179 participating museums are listed on the NEPIP database. During this interim, many museums, archives, and research institutions also accelerated the digitization of collections to help identify objects in U.S. collections that had changed hands in continental Europe between 1933-1945 to help fulfill the objectives of the Washington Principles.

In 2011, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) launched its [International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property](#) (Portal) in collaboration with 18 national and other archival institutions with records that pertain to Nazi-era cultural property. These institutions, along with expert national and international organizations, work together to extend public access to widely-dispersed records through this single internet Portal.

2. CHALLENGES FOR WWII-ERA PROVENANCE RESEARCH

In conjunction with the Portal launch, SPRI collaborated with NARA, AAMD and AAM to host a two-day seminar in which museum professionals and others interested in WWII-era provenance learned about new technologies, strategies for research, and collaborative projects. Experts guided discussions about using these resources and shared results of recent and ongoing research projects. One hundred fifty people attended, including guest speakers and representatives from 60 museums, 34 U.S. states, and 10 European countries.

Three observations came into sharpened focus during these seminar discussions:

- To build familiarity and trust between people from different institutions and countries, the field needs more opportunities for face-to-face meetings to discuss the challenges of WWII-era provenance research.
- When provenance research results cannot be broadly shared, nor resources accessed easily throughout the community of professional researchers, museums often must “reinvent the wheel,” draining their scarce resources.
- While the Portal extends public access to widely-dispersed records through this single portal, no federated search of its records is possible, which limits its effectiveness.

Searchable Data

Museum curators who conduct provenance research on art objects in museum collections traditionally record their results in narrative text format. They then turn their information over to registrars and other data-entry specialists, who enter it into one of several different museum collections databases. These narrative documents, though humans can read them easily, are not “data” in the sense that technologists require to develop machine-readable search across different databases. Through widespread adoption of a single standard for recording provenance data, this information will at some point be viewable across institutions and collections, allowing museums to ask more nuanced questions about the ownership history of their objects.

In keeping with the lessons of the May 2011 seminar, many emerging art historians and museum professionals are working to record their research not only in narrative format, but also in a format that enables sharing and exchange of data across collections and institutions. To illuminate gaps in data that indicate need for further research, more is gained when institutions collaborate on research than when they work in isolation.

With current resources, no single museum can address the complete panoply of provenance resources now available. Neither do museums have the financial resources to convert the provenance narratives they have already researched from text to machine-readable data. Institutional “silos” that isolate provenance research resources and results are no longer sustainable: they cannot respond to the increasing demand for transparency and greater access to research resources and results. Emerging museum professionals must be trained in the arcana of Nazi-era provenance research and must become conversant with newly-developing software that records provenance information as data so that it can be shared most broadly.

Lessons from Germany

In 2013, the German government appointed me the U.S. representative to the six-nation Advisory Group for the “Schwabinger (Gurlitt) Art Trove” Task Force, which Germany convened after the discovery of a cache of artwork potentially looted during the Nazi era in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of Hildebrand Gurlitt, an art dealer for the Nazis. The Advisory Group was tasked with oversight of research on the 1,230-object trove, and with reporting of results. During my time in Berlin (2014-2016), I saw that:

- The world outside Germany is not aware of the scale of the efforts and resources that Germany has invested over the last 20 years to come to grips with its National Socialist past.
- The differences between German and U.S. museum and research methodologies—and between their legal, cultural, and historical understandings of provenance research—must be addressed.
- The field of provenance research, as practiced in both countries, has progressed to the point that face-to-face meetings between professionals from both countries could be very useful in accelerating collaborative research, enabling a two-way flow of information to help both Germans and American researchers with their research questions.

A bilateral exchange could result in new insights for historians to piece together a history of the World War II years on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and beyond. Conversations with German colleagues at research institutes and museums in Munich, Dresden, and Berlin increased my determination to bring together German and American experts to discuss the scholarly, museum, and legal contexts in which Nazi-era provenance research takes place.

3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

SPRI is actively engaging the challenges of provenance research by forming networks of provenance professionals, exploring how technology can help museums share provenance information, and helping to train the next generation of researchers.

German/American Provenance Research Exchange for Museum Professionals (PREP), 2017-2019

In 2012, the German Foreign Ministry encouraged me to investigate the possibility of funding through its European Recovery Program, an off-shoot of the German Marshall Plan that the American government implemented to aid the reintegration of Germany into the world economic order after World War II. Although the Marshall Plan has been primarily a source for university exchanges, Hermann Parzinger, President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation–Berlin State Museums, and its legal counsel, Carola Thielecke, immediately grasped the possibilities of a museum exchange focused on provenance research. Parzinger and Richard Kurin, Acting Provost/Under Secretary for Museums and Research at the Smithsonian, became PREP’s co-chairs, and Thielecke and I co-organized the project, working closely with Petra Winter, Director of the Central Archives in Berlin and Laurie A. Stein, SPRI’s Senior Advisor.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, the Central Institute for Art History in Munich (ZiKG), and the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD), signed on as PREP partners and committed to host one exchange each. The new German Center for Lost Art (DZK) came aboard as a consulting participant. In August 2016, the German government announced that it would fund PREP’s application through the German Program for Transatlantic Encounters and the German Commission for Culture and the Media. Additional funding comes from the PREP partner institutions and the Smithsonian Women’s Committee.

While American and German museum professionals on both sides of the Atlantic often deal with similar questions regarding WWII-era provenance, the German/American Provenance Research Exchange Program for Museum Professionals (PREP) brings them together, for the first time, for systematic, long-term exchange. In each of the three years of the PREP grant (2017-2019), a new cohort of 11 German and 10 American participants, specialists in WWII-era provenance, will be selected through a competitive process. Participants will include provenance researchers, curators, collections managers, archivists, lawyers, information technology experts and graduate students. By prioritizing Asian art, decorative arts and works on paper, PREP widens the scope of WWII-era provenance research, which to date has given priority to painting, sculpture and Judaica.

Each cohort will gather twiceⁱ—once in Germany and once in the U.S.—for weeklong exchanges comprised of roundtables, symposia, and meetings with their counterparts in the host city’s museums and archives.ⁱⁱ PREP exchanges are designed to increase mutual understanding of the other nation’s provenance training, resources, and methodologies, and to improve practices and results. PREP participants discuss the current and future practices of provenance research, methods for international dissemination of findings, and important research topics and resources in both countries, with the aim of generating collaborative research projects. In each of the six host cities, the PREP exchange includes an educational program open to the public.

The participants’ extended engagement with PREP builds in their long-term commitment to the development of a German/American provenance network. The six months separating each year’s spring and fall exchanges give participants time to develop collaborations and to plan their contributions to the “German/American Guide to Resources for Nazi-Era Provenance Research,” to be published online at

the end of the three-year PREP program. Within the Program timeframe, members of each cohort are expected to produce a publicly-available outcome of their work or to report to their institutions and professional networks about what they have learned.

PREP's key goals are to:

- Provide a locus for extended scholarly person-to-person exchange on topics important to provenance researchers, calling upon the expertise of the various departments within museums' structures to build a "provenance research *autobahn*" to speed up the research and sharing of its results.
- Facilitate the mentoring of the next generation of museum professionals who will engage in this work.
- Bring content experts together with information technologists to develop a means of federating search functions designed to meet the specific needs of 21st century provenance research.
- Increase the transparency of provenance research efforts in museums.
- Educate the public in the complexities and challenges of WWII-era provenance research.

The [1st PREP Exchange](#) took place February 5-10, 2017 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. [Applications for the 2018 Exchange](#) will be open this summer.

Museums and Linked Open Data

With the huge increase in computing capacity of the last decade that enables cross-disciplinary data mining, academic art history departments, research institutions, and museums are struggling to keep up with, structure, and utilize the enormous volume of data so recently generated. At the same time, these institutions have a strong interest in protecting the integrity of their sources, resources, and results from accident and malfeasance. SPRI is working on several fronts to address these needs. Currently, linked open data (LOD) seems to offer the most promising avenue to develop cross-institutional platforms for sharing provenance data and updating it in real time.

[Art Tracks](#), a project of the Carnegie Museum of Art (CMOA), aims to transform traditional written provenance records into searchable data—data that captures the complexity and specificity of information that museum provenance researchers generate—with a focus on building tools that are usable across multiple institutions. These tools will turn provenance narratives into structured data by building a suite of open source software tools. Through a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, CMOA is now collaborating with SPRI and the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art (F|S), and the Yale Center for British Art. ⁱⁱⁱ The Getty Provenance Index is also consulting on the project.

[The Asian Art Provenance Connections Project](#): In 2014, after the F|S completed extensive research on nearly 400 Chinese objects with World War II-era provenance gaps, the museum quickly realized that this information was still of limited use, because the information was neither contextualized nor searchable. Consequently, the F|S devised an approach to link fifty WWII-era Asian art collector and dealer biographies with its art objects and associated archival data. This project launched online in 2016 as the Asian Art Provenance Connections Project. The project links selected Asian art collectors and dealers with associated objects in the F|S collections and with Smithsonian-wide archival and collection information. By exposing relationships articulated through the data, the project supports effective research methodologies and promotes international awareness and exchange of information concerning Asian art provenance.

Universities and Provenance

To carry the work forward and generate new results, we can transfer lessons learned from museums, archives, and research institutions engaged in Nazi-era provenance research to contemporary study and teaching of art history and museum studies. SPRI advocates for projects that share with emerging professionals the received wisdom and experience of the archivists, scholars, curators and collection managers who have been working in the field for decades.^{iv}

New Federated Search Project at the Digital Curation and Innovation Center (DCIC), University of Maryland.

SPRI is working with the DCIC on next steps to improve the functionality of the International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property. Current archival information in the Portal collections is heterogeneous, the archival context ambiguous, the original context difficult to reconstruct and written in many different languages. While the institutional websites that hold the archival information remain siloed, it is now possible to use common terms across the Portal to conduct searches.

Also, DCIC and University of Maryland IT and Museum Studies graduate students are working with a professional software developer to use F|S provenance databases to develop and test a prototype that structures and links provenance data. The goal of this project is to enable federated searches across disparate databases and institutions, while assuring the security of the data.

DCIC is also collaborating with the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) in support of its mission to aid the Holocaust research community by building a digital infrastructure and facilitating human networks. EHRI provides online access to information about dispersed sources relating to the Holocaust through its online portal, and to tools that enable researchers and archivists to collaboratively work with such sources. EHRI aims to increase coordination among the extensive network of researchers and archivists, and to initiate new transnational and collaborative approaches to the study of the Holocaust.

A New Master's Program in International Provenance Research

In the fall of 2016, the Art History Department at the University of Glasgow and the Smithsonian Institution/SPRI launched the first graduate program (MSc) to deal specifically with provenance research. The interdisciplinary [“Art History: Collecting and Provenance in an International Context”](#) program focuses on a broad range of topics, including provenance research methodologies, legal issues, the looting and trafficking of cultural objects, and the history of collecting.

4. BEYOND THE WWII ERA

With increased sensitivity to the responsibilities of museums to account for the objects in their collections that have contested ownerships or gaps in their ownership histories, museums must increasingly share their collections and make them more widely (digitally) available for study. Some museums are shifting their collecting philosophy from one of “ownership at any cost” to one of “stewardship and access.” By sharing information, museums can develop a more complete understanding of works of art in their historical *milieux*, and sharing technical know-how can improve conservation practices.

Now, many years after the systematized misappropriations of World War II, the violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria has resulted in extensive looting of museums and archeological sites: objects taken from these countries and others are making their ways through international art markets.

CONCLUSION

Today's looted art is today's, and tomorrow's, thorny problem of justice and restitution; if Holocaust-era misappropriation is any indicator, this situation will prove problematic in years to come.^v It has already led to a greater appreciation of the necessity of documented and established chains of ownership within the international museum and academic communities.

SPRI's projects focus on three areas which we think are applicable to the development of effective strategies to address and help prevent contemporary loss of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage:

- Developing a network of trained, committed professionals who are in regular contact, and update each other on relevant developments;
- Training the next generation of professionals; and
- Working with technologists to devise ways of maximizing the potential of new developments to inform, assist, and implement the work.

In order to build on the lessons learned and new resources generated from the PREP exchanges focused on WWII-era provenance research, we plan to submit a second European Recovery Program grant for two additional years of exchanges that would focus on antiquities and post-colonial collections. Our hope is that what has been so laboriously gathered from World War II-era research can be brought to international efforts in defense of cultural heritage in current and future situations of potential loss of our common legacies.

END NOTES

ⁱ The 2nd Exchange (2017) will be hosted by the SPK in Berlin; the 3rd Exchange (2018) by the GRI in Los Angeles; the 4th Exchange (2018) by ZlfK in Munich; the 5th Exchange by SKD in Dresden (2019), and the final, 6th Exchange (2019) by SPRI in Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱ The 1st German/American Provenance Research Exchange for Museum Professionals was hosted by The Metropolitan Museum of Art from February 5-10th, 2017. Thirty German and American museum professionals held a series of discussions about the differences between the German and American milieu around provenance at museums and archives, compared German and American legal systems and the ways that their institutions record and share provenance results and data, and considered how best to collaborate internationally on research projects. PREP participants also toured "behind the scenes" with their colleagues at 12 additional museums and research institutions in Manhattan.

ⁱⁱⁱ See livestream of David Newbury's 27 February 2017 presentation, "Standardizing Museum Provenance for the Twenty-First Century," delivered at the Yale Center for British Art. Newbury is the lead developer of Art Tracks. <http://britishart.yale.edu/multimedia-video/27/4261>. Also see Art Track's website <http://www.museumprovenance.org/> for more information on the project and information on the 2017 Digital Provenance Symposium, Art Tracks and the Digital Humanities to be held at the Carnegie Museum of Art on Monday, November 6, 2017.

^{iv} For the College Art Association 2016 Annual Conference February 3-6, in Washington, DC, SPRI organized a session, "Awareness →Professionalization →Career Opportunities? Teaching Provenance Research in the Field of Art History." Session abstract: While provenance has always been part of the art world, the 1998 *Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art* marked an important step in raising public and professional awareness of this complex discipline. The Principles, and pending lawsuits for restitution, have led many institutions to step up the research of their collections. Furthermore, the 2013 discovery of the "Gurlitt Trove" in Munich and the recent looting of museums and archeological sites in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria have further underlined the need to establish chains of ownership. As numerous job postings testify, provenance research has thus become a key professional challenge for the art market, and museum and academic communities. Co-Chairs: Paul Jaskot, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, DePaul University, Chicago, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Jane C. Milosch, Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative, Office of the Undersecretary for History, Art, and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Presenters: Christel H. Force, Associate Research Curator for Modern and Contemporary Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Christian Fuhrmeister, Zentralinstitut fuer Kunstgeschichte and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich; Meike Hoffmann, Wiss. Mitarbeiterin und Projektkoordinatorin, Forschungsstelle "Entartete Kunst", Kunsthistorisches Institut; Nick Pearce, Sir John Richmond Chair of Fine Art, School of Culture & Creative Arts, University of Glasgow; Senior Fellow Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative, 2014-15; Megan Fontanella, Associate Curator, Collections and Provenance, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; MaryKate Cleary, Director of Research, Art Recovery International (formerly Collection Specialist, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York).

^v For the American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting, May 26-29, 2016, In Washington, D.C., SPRI collaborated with the Smithsonian Cultural Heritage Preservation Office to organize a session entitled, "Today's Looted Art = Tomorrow's Provenance Problem." Session abstract: The 2013 discovery of the "Gurlitt Trove" in Munich and the increase in lawsuits against museums for restitution of Nazi-era looted art have forced them to increase provenance research into their collections. Museums and archeological sites in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria are being systematically looted, and objects taken from these and other countries are today making their way through international art markets. Today's looted art is tomorrow's thorny problem of justice & restitution—and will prove problematic in years to come. International museum leaders, experts in archeology, anthropology, art law and art history, and history of collecting discuss the challenges and opportunities of provenance research, and its role in museums. The panel was moderated by Richard Kurin, Acting Provost and Under Secretary for Museums and Research, Smithsonian Institution, and included Hermann Parzinger, President of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, SPK (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), Berlin, Germany; Sharon H. Cott, Senior Vice President, Secretary, and General Counsel of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Patty Gerstenblith, Chair of the State Department's Cultural Property Advisory Committee, and Director of the Center for Art, Museum and Cultural Heritage Law at DePaul University College of Law, Chicago, Illinois; and Gerard Vaughan, Director of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

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