

ADDENDUM

THE JEWISH DIGITAL CULTURAL RECOVERY PROJECT (JDCRP)

The organised looting of cultural objects by the Nazis, their allies, and collaborators happened not only in Germany but throughout almost all of Europe. The international dimension of the greatest art theft in history was immediately perceived, and the need for a central registry has been acknowledged since the end of WWII. It was not until the late 1990's, however, that the idea of a central database was concretely addressed. In the wake of the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, there were attempts to compile information, but most databases that various countries – Germany, Austria, France, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, the United States, and others – tried to create primarily reflected the existing collections of their museums. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) recognized the need to go back to the original archives of looting. They realized that in view of the great scattering of movable cultural objects and of the archives concerning them, international cooperation needed to be paramount. The focus was on the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (see <https://www.errproject.org/>), and the first object-level integrated database rooted in archives that included information on what was taken, from whom, and the fate of the objects, if known, was the Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume (ERR Database) (see <https://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>) that the Claims Conference produced in cooperation with the German Federal Archives, the Diplomatic Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, the United States National Archives and Records Administration, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Commission for Art Recovery (CAR).

The success of that database led in 2016 to discussions organized by Wesley Fisher of the Claims Conference-WJRO and Agnes Peresztegi of CAR with the main government agencies, archives and art history organizations of France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and the United States. There was consensus that the experience of the ERR Database, along with developments in technology, the greater opening of archives, and the knowledge acquired through other databases and related provenance research projects could be forged to build something much larger with the participation of a greater international network. And so the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery

Project (JDCRP) was born with the goal of creating a comprehensive archival based presentation of all Jewish-owned cultural objects plundered by the Nazis and their allies from the time of the objects' spoliation to the present. The idea is not to replace the currently published and often excellent existing databases but to find new ways of improving and refining research and educational tools.

The sense was that such an initiative needs to be run primarily in Europe, so in 2019 the JDCRP Stiftung was established in Berlin, Germany, with an international team and an initial network of international partners that it is hoped will only continue growing. Amongst these partners are the Archives Nationales of France; the Belgian State Archives; the Bundesarchiv; the Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, Paris; Christie's; the CIVS of France; the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste; the Getty Research Institute; the Institut national d'histoire de l'art; the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication of France (including the Archives de France and the Service interministériel des Archives de France); the United States National Archives and Records Administration; Sothebys: Fine Art Auctions and Private Sales; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and the German Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte. Also participating are the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, France; the Expertisecentrum Restitutie, NIOD Instituut voor oorlogs-holocaust-en genocidestudies; the Austrian Kommission für Provenienzforschung, and others.

An enterprise as ambitious as the JDCRP's comprehensive database requires an underlying case study that will provide a coherent methodological framework with which to test and prove the project's feasibility. On January 1, 2020 the JDCRP launched its pilot project: The Fate of the Adolphe Schloss Collection, co-funded by the European Union. Its purpose is to test and create a sustainable model database that captures and displays historical information about all Jewish-owned objects of art which were looted and displaced by the National Socialists and their allies between 1933 and 1945. The JDCRP pilot project that concentrates on items that were part of the Schloss family's collection includes all the phases of implementation, with a smaller volume and thematic scope, that will allow for the JDCRP database to be designed and built based on the results.

The Schloss collection consisted of 333 paintings of mainly Dutch and Flemish old masters assembled by Adolphe Schloss, a French-German internationally-renowned art connoisseur. This ultimately very European collection was looted in France in April 1943 and dispersed around the world in the ensuing years. The pilot project is exploring how art dealers, art galleries, auction houses, collectors and looting agencies, determined the fate – licit and/or illicit – of the Schloss paintings. One-third of the collection is still unaccounted for and circulating in the international art market. The pilot project is amassing thousands of documents and photographs from archives in France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States from which critical information will be extracted, processed and analyzed for inclusion into the model database. The relevant sections of historical databases developed by other research projects created using archival sources will complement the pilot project's database model. Experts from three advisory groups (archives, digital technology, and provenance research/art history) provide critical input to the pilot project on how best to organize, analyze, and display the thousands of pieces of information. The pilot project will ensure that all documents, texts, and images are fully searchable and can be queried so as to elicit complex analytical results which can also be visualized. An additional outcome of the pilot project is the creation of educational materials designed for both specialized and lay audiences on a variety of topics surrounding the project such as: archival research, provenance research methods, comparative and critical reading and analyzing of historical documents, to name but a few. The pilot project will also promote best practices on how to draft and present the history of objects from the time of their creation to the present.

Led by Marc Masurovsky, Academic Director, who was also responsible for the ERR Database, and by Avishag Ben-Yosef, Project Manager, the pilot project database relies on an event-based approach to tell the story of art objects as they move across time and space through the events and entities that shape their movement. Equal weight is assigned to the objects, the people and the events shaping their destiny. In an event-based database, the object-specific narrative is de-centered while the object becomes recontextualized. The event-based approach, as opposed to the traditional object-based approach, innovates in its focus on the institutions and individuals who are involved directly or indirectly with the fate of displaced art objects. The pilot project will conclude its initial tests, on schedule, as of the end of June 2021.

In consultation with its partner organizations and advisors, the JDCRP will then move to the next phase, which will consist of moving tens of thousands of items taken primarily in France, including many that did not go through the Jeu de Paume but are currently being held in the ERR Database waiting to be transferred to the new general database, after which will begin the challenge of incorporating hundreds of thousands of objects from a similar number of archival documents from a variety of sources. The database will enable researchers, ministries of culture, museum curators, art dealers and auction houses – but also families and the generally curious – to investigate the fate and history of looted cultural objects.

If we have been able to adhere to our timeline, it has been largely due to the wonderful cooperation of our various partner organisations. The current global health crisis could have theoretically ground our project to a halt. The travel bans enacted and the closing of archives were indeed problematic for our first phase, which consisted in the compiling and extraction of information from various repositories in numerous countries. Many of the archives were extremely cooperative, sending us documentation and information during the quarantines enforced in many European countries. Our partner list went from a two-dimensional enumeration of organizations to a multi-dimensional network of people who believe in the project. In our decentralised and globalized world, international cooperation cannot be sidelined. A project as large as the JDCRP is nothing if not international. The JDCRP Stiftung looks forward to furthering cooperation by sponsoring a number of related projects and by helping develop education in provenance research and education on the Holocaust generally through the history of the artworks and other cultural property that was plundered.

For further information, see <http://jdcrp.org/>.

