

## Seizing the Moment: The JDCRP Open-Source Digital Data Platform for Nazi-Era Cultural Plunder

Historians have long struggled to find ways to document the vastness of the Holocaust, with its unprecedented scale of murder and destruction. Due to the immensity of the task, multiple gaps in research remain, including the degree to which the National Socialist plunder of European Jewish property was intertwined with the systematic attempt by the Nazis and their allies to extinguish all traces of Jewish lives, culture, and identity.

Three-quarters of a century later, the dimensions of this meticulously organized theft remain largely unknown. In recent years, historians and provenance researchers have stepped up investigations to document what was taken, from where, and from and by whom, charting where possible the journey and the fate of the looted property.

Although considerable archival documentation exists, the research has been significantly hampered by the difficulties of researchers and affected families to access documentation. Archival evidence is geographically scattered and often in fragmentary form, lacking digitization, with many records difficult to access. Archival search systems for information are often inadequate to locate vital information. Potential treasure troves of documents in both public and private hands remain closed to researchers. The whereabouts of many objects remain unknown, due to the looting, confiscation, and wide-ranging dispersal of Jewish family collections. And public awareness is lacking: Few have asked about the fate of the immense number of looted possessions and property seized outright, or of the possessions Holocaust victims were forced to sell, give away, or abandon to survive or migrate.

The final resolution of the groundbreaking 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust Era Assets identified the lack of attention to this issue, calling for a central registry of archival material. In addition to several commercially based registries, a number of

valuable open-source pilot projects, including the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) Jeu de Paume database in 2010 and the International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property in 2011, demonstrated the feasibility of a larger-scale project. The German Lost Art Foundation sponsors the rapidly expanding Provena and Lost Art websites that provide valuable information on hundreds of looted collections.

Nonetheless, a comprehensive open-source digital database for existing archival documentation still does not exist.

Only recently, given the development of more sophisticated digital tools, expanding amounts of provenance research, growing access to relevant archives, and surging public interest, has it become realistic to consider creating the long-held vision of a central archival database for stolen cultural objects. In 2019, this combination of factors prompted the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany and the Commission for Art Recovery, in close coordination with a transnational network of experts and partner institutions, to establish the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project (JDCRP) Foundation.

Based in Berlin, the foundation was launched to create an open source, archivally based data platform of cultural objects looted from European Jewry by the Nazis, their allies, and collaborators. The JDCRP strives to intensify and multiply the exchange of research and information being collected on looted cultural objects for research and educational purposes. Cultural objects to be documented will include visual arts, applied arts, Judaica, musical instruments, books, and other objects of significant cultural value.

By drawing together various archival sources in one location, the JDCRP central archival platform will provide larger amounts of information than was previously possible regarding the ownership, seizure, dispersion, and recovery efforts of Jewish-owned property in pre-WWII. It will as well provide greater



accessibility to little-known archival information, such as tax records, shipping registers, and restitution claims, offering new opportunities to chart the journeys of the looted objects.

In 2020 the JDCRP launched the EU co-funded pilot project, “The Fate of the Adolphe Schloss Collection.” This distinguished collection of Old Master paintings owned by French-Jewish businessman Adolphe Schloss was looted by German Nazi and French Vichy officials in 1943 from non-occupied southern France. The project compiled information on the fate of the 333 looted paintings, drawing upon archival material and research in France, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands. The project resulted in identifying variables that need to be considered in the larger eventual database; the provenance of the objects; and a detailed timeline that tracks the events, persons, and objects. The Schloss collection project also provides an initial data structure for the inclusion of additional collections in the central JDCRP platform and offers basic educational information about the use of archives to track stolen art.

An EU co-funded extension project is slated to begin in the fall of 2022 that will transfer archival information from the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg Jeu de Paume database to a new central structure, by providing direct links to the relevant archives. JDCRP is also exploring methods to improve search methods and evolving technologies to enhance accessibility. The project will also document in detail two additional looted collections and expand educational material to enable a wider circle of users of the data platform.

In addition to the compilation of archival documents and the investigation of collections, JDCRP is supporting research that will provide unique overviews

of the scope and dimension of the cultural plunder. In early 2022, JDCRP launched the “Persecuted Jewish Artists” project to document the thousands of European Jewish artists persecuted and largely murdered during the Nazi era. Their art was often confiscated or destroyed, with their work thusly forgotten. The project will create an initial central index for the persecuted artists, in the hope that such an index will spur further research and discoveries of art that helped shape the history of early twentieth-century art. With the whereabouts of hundreds of thousands of looted objects still unknown, the archival material can provide Holocaust survivors and their family heirs an opportunity to reconnect with family histories, providing a measure of moral justice. It can offer expanded perspectives on the Jewish contribution to European pre-war cultural heritage. Finally, a central platform will provide the basis to map the scope and mechanisms of the largest cultural theft known in history, allowing us to understand more fully the devastating impact of cultural theft during the Holocaust.

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JEWISH DIGITAL CULTURAL RECOVERY PROJECT