

CHAPTER 99

Digitizing the Nazi Theft of European Jewish Culture:

The Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project

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One of the most significant chapters of the genocide of European Jewry is one of the least known: the audacious loot-ing campaign by the Nazis, their allies, and collaborators to rob European Jews of their cultural assets. Its main goal: the erasure of Jewish identity, history, and culture.

The campaign of cultural extinction began immediately following the assumption of power by the National Socialists when Jewish lives unraveled overnight, first in Germany and later throughout occupied Europe. Discriminatory laws destroyed existences, property was sold to finance daily life, and unreasonable emigration taxes forced liquidation sales and property abandonment. Under occupation, the possessions of Jews throughout Europe were confiscated

and reappropriated. After Jewish men, women, and children were seized and deported to ghettos, transit camps, and extermination camps, their household property was confiscated and often auctioned off and sold.

Given the enormity of the Shoah and the primacy of addressing survivor needs, stolen property has understandably received less attention. However, as remaining survivors and their heirs begin searching for information about lost family possessions, and media attention pivots to cases of restitution of cultural objects, research to trace lost and stolen property has surged in the past decade. There is growing awareness that reconstruction of a once vibrant European Jewish universe can be bolstered by a stronger focus on the cultural objects and archival material that document extinguished lives and communities.

I. Charting the Dimensions of the Looting

To this day, there is no overview of the dimensions of the largest cultural theft in modern history. There is no central compilation of what was stolen, from whom, and by whom. However, access to this information is needed to determine the journey and eventual fate of much of the property. Therefore, it is urgent to secure the original documents of the looting by the Nazis and their allies, as well as the record left behind by Jewish owners, to recapture the nearly lost history of the widescale looting of cultural objects that was an integral part of the Holocaust.

There were numerous participants involved directly or indirectly in the plunder of artworks, libraries, archives, musical instruments, ceremonial Judaica, among other cultural objects. A broad network was needed to locate and plunder the objects. These included National Socialist officials and collaborators, Allied Forces representatives, police officers, art experts, archivists, informers, transport workers, harbor officials, directors of auction houses, art galleries and museums, as well as forced laborers. The largest number of participants in these crimes were the ultimate recipients of the looted objects. The circles of those involved wittingly or unwittingly expanded further in the postwar years as ever larger networks of buyers, sellers, donors, and recipients continued to traffic with the looted property.

Not surprisingly, the archival evidence of a theft of such unprecedented dimensions was hidden, scattered, or destroyed. Surviving but neglected evidence disappears every day. It is of great importance to secure the remaining documentation chronicling the theft before it is too late, to prevent further deterioration and disappearance of the material. Today's sophisticated software technology provides previously unavailable means to digitize, organize and link archives with relevant material. New software applications that can provide additional support to digitize and display highly disparate types of source material, in numerous languages, are currently in various stages of development.

II. History of the Central Database Concept

The need for a central database for cultural objects stolen in large part from Jewish owners during the Nazi era has been widely acknowledged since the end of World War II. However, the concept of a comprehensive object-level database was not concretely addressed until the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, which established ethical standards on restitution and spurred provenance research.

Initial attempts to compile more comprehensive archival platforms to aid provenance research were undertaken by various countries, including Germany, Austria, France, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and the United States. However, the databases primarily reflected the existing collections of each country's governmental museums. Against this background, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO), identified the need for international cooperation in creating a central platform to bring together archival information on the worldwide dispersed looted cultural objects.

A first step toward such a registry was taken by the Claims Conference and the WJRO through their support of a database of the records of objects looted in France, the Netherlands and Belgium by the main German looting agency, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR). This became the first archivally based registry to include

information on what was taken, from whom, and the fate of the objects if known. In 2010, *Cultural Plunder* by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume, also known as the ERR Database, under the direction of Marc Masurovsky, was issued by the Claims Conference, 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 (USHMM), and the Commission for Art Recovery (CAR) (see <https://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>).

The success of that database resulted in a meeting in Paris on May 4, 2016, organized by Dr. Wesley Fisher of the Claims Conference/WJRO and Dr. Agnes Peresztegi of the Commission for Art Recovery (CAR). Participants represented central government agencies, archives and art history organizations in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and the United States. A consensus at that meeting emerged that a larger entity was needed to take full advantage of recent developments, including the experience gained in creating the ERR Database, technological advancements, newfound archival sources, and increasing numbers of relevant databases and provenance research projects. Key to the success would be the participation of a greater international network.

At that gathering and at subsequent additional meetings in Paris in 2018 and 2019, the Claims Conference and CAR recognized the importance of launching a European-based initiative to accept funding from a variety of sources. Accordingly, in 2019, the Claims Conference and the Commission for Art Recovery established the Berlin-based Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project (JDCRP) Foundation for two purposes: creation of an open-source, object-based database of all cultural objects, to the extent possible, looted from European Jewry by the National Socialists and their allies; and formation of a transnational network of experts and partner institutions.

The development of the foundation has been accompanied from the beginning by representatives from partner organizations, including archives, art history institutes, and museums, as well as provenance and technology experts. Current partners in the JDCRP Foundation partner network include 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 Austrian Kommission für Provenienzforschung; 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; Sotheby's: Fine Art Auctions and Private Sales; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and the German Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte. Formal observers are the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, France; and the Expertisecentrum Restitutie, NIOD Instituut voor oorlogs-holocaust-en genocidestudies.

III. Structuring the Central Database: Documentation, Research, and Education

To create a database of value to a broad spectrum of users, the foundation is focusing on three main goals: documentation from relevant archives, research to give context and meaning to the documents, and educational material to highlight the scope and impact of the theft for a broader public.

1. Securing Archival Documentation

The database will integrate existing archival information on the looted objects, employing state-of-the-art technology to improve access to source material. Archives that will be linked via the JDCRP central platform will include records that document the ownership, seizure, dispersion, and recovery efforts of Jewish-owned cultural property. The database will make available little-known troves of archival documents, such as tax records, shipping registers, and postwar restitution claims, improving the ability to cross-search archives to follow the journeys of the looted objects.

The database is expected to attract a wide range of users, including scholars, educators, students, claimants, art experts, archivists, lawyers, law enforcement and government officials, and the general public. When archival

information is more easily accessible, it opens new research prospects for a far larger audience, with the objects serving as a prism to help illuminate the stories of the objects, their owners, and the cultural sphere of a vanished world.

Currently, restricted access to archives, as well as a lack of digitization and search capabilities within documents and across databases, create major barriers for determining the provenance of disputed cultural objects. Therefore, the JDCRP Foundation will promote digitization of relevant archival material where this has not yet been done, working in close cooperation with its network of archival partners.

2. Linking Information through Research

Through additional research projects and education materials, a central platform for archival material on cultural objects looted during the National Socialist era can help restore the depth and breadth of the Jewish contribution to European cultural history. Research projects will allow more in-depth examination of additional collections and collectors, as was done with the JDCRP EU-funded pilot project on the Adolphe Schloss collection. The pilot project demonstrated that advanced software technology and digital humanities methodology can be used to create greater context and significance for relevant events and cultural objects, by providing linkages of relationships and related entities. Such projects can illuminate the time and place in history of the contributions made by artists and collectors of Jewish heritage, bringing to lifelong neglected facets of European culture.

3. Integrating NS-related Cultural Plunder into Holocaust Education

As the generation of Holocaust survivors dwindles, objects gain importance in providing an avenue of entry for more general audiences into Holocaust history. The dramatic destinies of the owners, as well as the still open searches for many of the objects, makes this sweeping crime a riveting point of entry into the Holocaust, particularly for younger generations. Educational materials can promote broader knowledge of the scope and scale of the robbery, helping anchor the theft as an integral part of Holocaust studies and curricula. With studies showing declining levels of knowledge about the Holocaust, educational units can prompt young people to research family histories and explore archival documents to learn more about the widespread cultural plunder perpetrated during the Nazi era. Student research can help close some of the significant gaps in knowledge that exist regarding the cultural networks in Jewish life prior to 1933.

IV. Heightening Public Awareness

Attitudes toward looted art have been evolving in the last decade. There has been a sea change of public opinion, with pressure growing on public institutions to research provenance, locate heirs and return looted work. The discovery in 2003 of the long unknown art trove of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of Hildebrand Gurlitt, one of the four major art dealers in the service of the Hitler regime, generated worldwide public attention. A prestigious group of scholars continue to review the provenance of artworks in the collection, which is now housed at the Museum of Fine Arts Bern, Switzerland. University departments of art history and museum studies are being continually expanded, with universities in Bonn, Berlin, and Lüneburg, among others, establishing or expanding departments for provenance research. Such developments increase the number of qualified provenance researchers to examine more fully the provenance of looted cultural objects, as well as promoting increased scholarly examination of various aspects of the plunder.

The seminal 1994 book, *The Rape of Europa* by Lynn H. Nicholas, has been followed by growing numbers of historical and fictionalized accounts of Nazi cultural plunder. Such books include exposés of key figures in the looting operations that reveal the lack of postwar accountability for their crimes, as well as providing profiles of the victims

whose lives were torn asunder by the plunder. George Clooney produced and directed a popular film in 2014 based on Robert Edsel's *Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, the story of the Allied war unit that was tasked toward the end of World War II with recovering as much of the art plunder as possible. Although this effort was laudable, recovery of looted art did not include return of the art to the families from whom it was stolen, but to the government of the country in which the massive thefts occurred.

The story of the 2006 return of Gustav Klimt's *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* and four other Klimt paintings to Maria Altmann (z"l), the niece of Adele Bloch-Bauer is told in *Woman in Gold*, a 2015 feature-length film starring Helen Mirren as Altmann. Since then, legal challenges to ownership of looted art have increased substantially, but American courts have denied on procedural grounds nearly all restitution claims made since the Altmann case (see chapter 97). Some governments—including Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—have established mediation commissions for disputed restitution cases. In 2016 the United States adopted legislation intended to facilitate the return of art plunder to legitimate heirs by decisions reached on the merits of the claims (see chapter 98).

No matter what results obtained immediately after World War II, when recovered stolen property was returned to its place of origin, or in the recent spate of legal cases after two major international conferences in Washington (1998) and in Prague-Terezin (2009), the need for access to data relevant to the massive thefts of cultural property remains an urgent priority. Several prototypes have emerged in recent years for databases that compile existing information on various aspects of the looting of cultural objects, such as those of the Central Registry of Information on Looted Cultural Property, 1933–1945 (www.lootedart.com) and the German Lost Art Foundation (www.kulturgutverluste.de). These databases provide valuable information, but they are not primarily archivally based or compiled from primary sources.

The Jeu de Paume database mentioned above documents the fate of tens of thousands of cultural objects stolen by Nazi looters and collaborators, primarily in Paris, and is based on primary sources. However, more modern technology now exists to allow greater searchability of the database, which was completed in 2010. The ERR database will be the first major archive integrated into the JDCRP central database. In July 2021, the JDCRP completed its first pilot project, The Fate of the Adolphe Schloss Collection, (JDCRP Pilot Project | Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project), with co-funding from the European Union. The event-based project demonstrates the expanded technological possibilities now available to create greater context for stories of stolen collections and other research topics.

V. The Path Ahead

Still, much remains to be done. Some public institutions and private collectors continue to insist that works with unknown provenance from 1933 to 1945 were purchased in good faith, declining to review the provenance of disputed works in their collections on the dubious grounds that the former owners are responsible for finding the objects, obviously so when the current possessor has hidden the asset from public view. Few governments have legislation requiring the return of stolen cultural objects. Some archives impose burdensome regulations regarding access to the necessary documentation; many documents are not yet digitized. Property that was taken by the Soviet Trophy Brigades remains in Russia, with little chance of restitution.

What can help increase knowledge of the journey of the stolen objects is a central platform for archival material related to the crime, as envisioned by the JDCRP Foundation with its planned database. It is urgent now for governments, as well as private and institutional donors, to provide a quantum leap in financial resources to allow the digitization and data entry of documents that will reveal the full dimensions and operations of the National Socialist looting campaign. Substantially increased funding will enable public institutions, non-profit organizations, researchers and affected individuals to uncover as much archival information as possible before it is lost to neglect and deterioration. Research and development efforts on the part of technology firms can pave the way to integration of far larger quantities of data, with improved software extracting relevant information from documents.

Probing the Provenance of Nazi-Confiscated Art and Achieving Harmonious Resolution of Conflicts

The knowledge derived from a central archival and historical platform can be used to expand understanding of both the long history of antisemitism before and during the National Socialist era, as well as the multiple stages of discrimination, persecution and planning that was necessary to implement the Holocaust. The information can also reveal far more than is previously known about the mechanisms and motives that led to large-scale government-sanctioned cultural plunder. With the whereabouts of hundreds of thousands of looted objects still unknown, the archival documentation can also provide a measure of moral justice by reconnecting families to vanished family histories) reclaiming their fates from obscurity, while expanding the story of the Jewish contribution to European cultural heritage.

More than two decades after the landmark Washington, DC Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets (1998) and more than a decade after the Terezin Declaration (2009), the plunder of art by the Nazis) their collaborators) and their allies is poised to receive long overdue public and scholarly attention. The added knowledge will fill in an inexplicably large historical gap, expanding knowledge of the Holocaust and of the mechanisms of cultural plunder on the path to genocide.

For further reading

Marc Masurovsky et al. Cultural Plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume ("ERR

Database"). New York: Claims Conference, 2000j <https://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/>.

Lynn H. Nicholas. The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War. New York:

Knopf, 1994 Knopf, 1994