

# Information, Transparency and Justice: International Provenance Research Colloquium

(Washington, DC, November 2004)

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**(Translated by Renate Gatzky, Magdeburg)**

## 1. GERMANY: PAST AND PRESENT

Even now in 2006, sixty years after the end of World War II, the subject of cultural assets seized under Nazi persecution (“looted art”) and displaced during the war (“trophy art”), continues to be of interest to politicians, historians, legal experts, and many others. Thus, at a meeting in January 2005, Germany’s Advisory Commission for the return of cultural assets seized as a result of Nazi persecution, particularly those cultural assets removed from Jewish ownership, recommended the return of four paintings presently in the possession of the Federal Republic of Germany to the community of heirs of Julius Freund.<sup>1</sup> Also in January 2005, Germany’s government, all federal states and central organizations of municipalities called on German public bodies not to slow down in their search for cultural assets seized as a result of Nazi persecution and to report any items found to the Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste (Coordination Office for Lost Cultural Assets) for display as part of its Internet database [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in February 2005, Franz von Lenbach’s painting “Prinzessin zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn” which had been seized by the Nazis was identified through [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de) and returned to the heirs of Bernhard Altmann.<sup>3</sup> The painting was part of the Remaining Stock CCP (“Linzer Liste”) within [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de) enlisting cultural objects with provenance gaps in the administration of Germany’s Bundesamt zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen (Federal Office for the settlement of owner-

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ship issues). The object was on loan from the Bundesamt and in possession of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Köln (Germany).

## 2. U.S.A.: THE INTERNATIONAL PROVENANCE RESEARCH COLLOQUIUM

International aspects of the search for looted and robbed art were highlighted by the “International Provenance Research Colloquium” organized by the American Association of Museums in Washington, D.C. on November 15 and 16, 2004, underlining the importance of this work both on the national and international level.

Whereas the Washington Conference on Holocaust Era Assets had adopted principles for finding and returning lost art over six years earlier,<sup>4</sup> the Colloquium dealt with a wide variety of national and international activities in specialist provenance research.

The Colloquium was opened by Erik Ledbetter (Project Manager, American Association of Museums, Washington, U.S.A.) who discussed efforts undertaken in the U.S. to identify assets whose origin was not fully proven. In this connection, Mr. Ledbetter also referred to [www.nepip.org](http://www.nepip.org), an Internet database listing finds in over 100 U.S. museums.

The next speaker, Lynn Nicholas (Historian/Researcher, Washington D.C., U.S.A.), described her experience gathered in compiling material for her universally acclaimed book “The Rape of Europa.”<sup>5</sup> She assessed and praised national and international efforts undertaken in the new media such as the Internet in order to identify objects in the field of looted art.

### *(i) National Archives*

The first major section of the conference was devoted to national activities. Helen Wechsler (Director International and Ethics Programs, American Association of Museums, Washington D.C., U.S.A.) dealt with problems in determining the provenance of assets and their description. For the latter, she said, the Association was trying to establish uniform standards. She criticized plans for one central website which was nearly impossible to establish. Marina Mixon (Spoliation Research Adviser, National Museums Directors’ Conference, London, U.K.) spoke about the efforts of British museums to find lost art in their own inventories. The author (Director, Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste, Magdeburg, Germany) gave an overview of the Koordinierungsstelle’s work with particular reference to a proposed provenance module in [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de) and the metasearch project. This metasearch project is intended to combine several national databases on looted art while preserving the autonomy of each of these databases, which would be lost by establishing one central system. Boguslaw Winid (Deputy Ambassador Polish

Embassy, Washington D.C., U.S.A.) spoke about the return to Poland of cultural assets seized during the war and the Polish documentations describing lost art (“Wartime Losses”), which has now grown to five volumes, with the sixth planned for 2005.

### *(ii) Current Research in Germany*

The next section of the Colloquium dealt with present research in Germany. As an introduction, Harald König (Bundesamt zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen—Federal Office for the settlement of ownership issues, Berlin, Germany) described the underlying legal basis and practical experience gained in the scope of the law of compensation of Nazi victims of persecution. Uwe Fleckner (Institute of Art History Hamburg University, Hamburg, Germany) spoke about his work in documenting the so-called “entartete Kunst” (“degenerate art”) which aimed, among other things, at compiling and listing all assets in one catalogue. Friedegund Weidemann (Researcher, National Gallery, Berlin, Germany) dealt with the Gallery’s efforts in the field of provenance research and related cases of restitution and return.

Nancy Yeide (Curator of Records, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.) opened the section entitled “Nazi Collections” with a report on her current research project aimed at fully cataloguing the Göring collection. She said that details on assets now in the collections of the Bavarian state were already given in Ilse von zu Mühlen’s publication “Die Kunstsammlung Hermann Görings.”<sup>6</sup> Birgit Schwarz (Independent art historian, Vienna, Austria) introduced her book “Hitler’s Museum”<sup>7</sup> and reported on how she had located sources of information. She particularly referred to the activities of Hitler’s “art agents” Posse<sup>8</sup> and Voss.<sup>9</sup> Bettina Bouresch (Historian, Rheinisches Archiv- und Museumsamt, Pulheim, Germany) presented details of collection activities below the level of Posse and Voss with particular reference to the Rhine Province. Ute Haug (Department of Provenance Research, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany) spoke about the Ribbentrop<sup>10</sup> collection and said that related material would serve as a basis for a larger research project dealing specifically with Ribbentrop’s personality and individual assets in the collection.

### *(iii) Collectors and Collections*

Following was a section on “Collectors and Collections” which was opened by Stephanie Tasch (Provenance Researcher, Christie’s, Berlin, Germany) with a report on selected female collectors during the Weimar Republic. Michael Hall (Curator, London and Exbury House, London, U.K.) described worldwide efforts to compile a central register of cultural assets owned by more than five generations of the Rothschild dynasty. The Austrian provenance researcher and author of “Was einmal war,”<sup>11</sup> Sophie Lillie, spoke about the Jenny Steiner collection, which

had been taken away from the rightful owners in Austria and was now being reconstructed using the most diverse sources. Esther Tisa Francini (Provenance researcher, Zurich, Switzerland) referred to a number of German art collectors who did business also in Switzerland and even the U.S.A., a subject that has been little studied so far. Here Francini saw room for further research, which would help to reconstruct the collections of these dealers. Vanessa Maria Voigt (Provenance Researcher, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany) described provenance studies at the Sprengel Museum where since 2002 she has dealt with aspects of art seized under Nazi persecution. Madeleine Korn (Provenance Researcher, London, U.K.) talked about the relationship between the art dealer Alphonse Kann and his employee Michael Stewart who played a major role in selling many of Kann's items.

#### *(iv) Archives and Sources*

Opening the section on "Archives and Sources", Lucian Simmons (Senior Director, Sotheby's, London, U.K.) discussed various sources of provenance research in Britain. Patricia Teter (Senior Editor, Getty Center for the Study of Collecting and Provenance, Los Angeles, U.S.A.) described her work with a number of provenance sources as difficult because the aim was to include media information, private notes and information given by contemporaries. These sources were to be listed and published, including publication on the Internet. Marc Masurovsky (Research Coordinator, Conference of Jewish Materials Claims against Germany, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.) spoke about the organization's history and its work, one example being the negotiations on compensation to be paid to forced laborers. Robert Holzbauer (Head, Provenance Research, Leopold Museum, Vienna, Austria) and Ruth Pleyer (Researcher, Vienna, Austria) discussed provenance research in Austrian archives and various domestic sources of data. Genealogical research could benefit particularly from detailed registration office lists kept in Austria and the VUGESTA<sup>12</sup> registers.

#### *(v) Judaica and Jewish Museums*

Under the heading of "Judaica and Jewish Museums", Karen Franklin (Director, Judaica Museum, Riverdale, N.Y., U.S.A.) described her costly and lengthy search for information on a Seder plate, which could finally be returned to the owners. Bernhard Purin (Director, Jewish Museum, Munich, Germany) reported on the transfer to the U.S. of cultural assets confiscated during the war. The presentation of Michael Busek (Manager, Jewish Museum, Prague, Czech Republic) dealt with efforts to identify books in Prague's Jewish Museum and return them to their owners. The total number of books involved was 190,000, of which 158,000 had been returned to date. The remainder had been listed in a database. Daniel Dratwa (Curator, Jewish Museum of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium) spoke about books of Jew-

ish provenance in his country and said that research was only at the beginning. He mentioned a total of about 500,000, of which less than one percent had so far been returned.

### *(vi) The Art Trade*

Angelika Görnandt (Provenance Researcher, Bundesamt zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen—Federal Office for the settlement of ownership issues, Berlin, Germany) was among the speakers in the last section devoted to the art trade. She discussed the development of purchase prices in Berlin's art market between 1933 and 1945 and concluded, among other things, that prices for top works increased about ten times between 1933 and 1944 and those in the medium price segment about twenty times. Katja Terlau (Provenance Researcher, Cologne, Germany) talked about the biography of Hildebrandt Gurlitt, an art dealer, and his role exemplified for the case of selling individual paintings to the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, Germany.

## 3. SUMMARY

One of the outstanding results of the Washington Colloquium was the presentation of the work and progress made in individual countries during the last years in a very well-organized and highly structured sequence. No provision was made for detailed discussion, which, however, did not detract from the usefulness of the conference, as almost all participants were experts with the required know-how. There was time for them, after the presentations, to talk to speakers directly on subjects of specific interest.

Summarizing, it can be said that there are a wide variety of national and international activities going on in the field of provenance research, some of which are quite specialized. In the last few years, a number of databases have been established and research projects started. Future efforts should therefore focus, on networking the information resources available. Here metasearch can play an important role with regard to databases on the one hand, while on the other, e.g. Germany's Koordinierungsstelle—according to its task—would have to look for findings of third parties that could collect lost and found information on looted art and trophy art in order to bring both sides together.

Just how important provenance research is was evident not only during the Colloquium but also one day after it had closed, when the Austrian Embassy organized a meeting entitled "Looted Art: Nazi Methodology in Austria and other European Countries." There were presentations by Sophie Lillie (Austria), Nancy Yeide (U.S.A.), Robert Holzbauer and Ruth Pleyer (both from Austria), and the author (Germany) which met with intense interest by the audience.

At the beginning of the Colloquium, Lynn Nicholas had pointed out that databases were becoming ever more important and said, with a view to restitution and compensation, that “justice depends on information.” There is no better way to describe the aims of the Washington Conference, the numerous national and international activities, and the purpose of the upcoming work in this field.

## ENDNOTES

1. See the Commission’s statement at [www.lostart.de/nforum/forum\\_show\\_post.php3?lang=german&id=843](http://www.lostart.de/nforum/forum_show_post.php3?lang=german&id=843) as per February 13, 2006.
2. See statement there as per February 13, 2006.
3. See press release at [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de) as per February 13, 2006.
4. See [www.lostart.de/stelle/grundsatzewashington.php3?lang=german](http://www.lostart.de/stelle/grundsatzewashington.php3?lang=german), status as per February 13, 2006.
5. Lynn Nicholas: *The Rape of Europa*, New York 1994.
6. Ilse von zur Mühlen: *Die Kunstsammlung Hermann Görings—Ein Provenienzbericht der Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen*, München 2004.
7. Birgit Schwarz: *Hitlers Museum*, Wien 2004.
8. Hans Posse (1879–1942) acquired cultural objects for Hitler for the planned “Führermuseum” in Linz.
9. Hermann Voss (1884–1969); successor of Hans Posse (note 8).
10. Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893–1946); Reichsaußenminister (“Secretary of State”) from 1938 to 1945.
11. Sophie Lillie: *Was einmal war—Handbuch der enteigneten Kunstsammlungen Wiens*, Wien 2003.
12. VUGESTA = Verwertungsstelle für jüdisches Umzugsgut der Gestapo (The Gestapos Office for the disposal of the property of Jewish Emigrants).