

# Jewish Perspectives on Provenance Research and the Art World

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**I**n recent years, interest has surged amongst researchers and museums in the pre-World War II Jewish contribution to German and European culture and in the Nazi-era plunder of cultural objects belonging to Jewish owners. This is a welcome development, particularly given the sparseness of research on European Jewish cultural heritage and the Holocaust. However, all too often, such work is undertaken with limited consideration of Jewish perspectives. Jews are primarily viewed as victims. The ensuing research, analysis, and conclusions thus can lack the necessary depth and context to enable a richer understanding of the Jewish presence in pre-war and post-war European culture, providing nuanced portraits of Jews and Jewish life. There is also an inherent danger of incorporating personal projections and stereotypes about Jews and their role in society.

## **ASKING UNASKED QUESTIONS**

To bring in Jewish perspectives more fully, greater focus is needed on Jewish individuals and their communities before, during, and after the Nazi era. Numerous questions can be explored: Who were the Jews engaged in the arts and letters? Given rabbinic rejections of graven images, what sparked their interest in culture? What factors influenced their decisions to become active as dealers, collectors, artists, and patrons? How did they live and what was their place in society? What were their values and beliefs, and their relationship to Judaism? What were the motivations, impact, and legacies of their engagement? How did they define their Jewish identity and what impact, if any, did it

have on their cultural engagement? What kinds of cultural objects, including art, Jewish ceremonial objects, and books did they collect? What kinds of interactions marked their contact with the non-Jewish world? How were their lives touched by antisemitism? Answering such questions can provide a fuller understanding of the personalities and lifestyles of Jews active in cultural and intellectual pursuits. Also important is the depiction of the treatment of Jews within society at large, including the frequent encounters with antisemitism that have accompanied centuries of Jewish life.

## **THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL PLUNDER DURING THE NAZI ERA AND THE AFTERMATH**

There is still much to research and learn about the elaborate network of perpetrators of the vast looting operation of Jewish property during the Nazi era. Who were the bureaucrats, government representatives, businessmen and businesswomen, and even neighbors so willing to conduct and profit from the stolen property campaign? What fueled the brutal and dehumanizing language marking their words and actions? What was and remains the impact on the victims and their heirs of the forcible loss of possessions that defined identity and cultural heritage? It has become ever more evident that the widespread looting and forced sales of property owned by Jews in Europe was a vital step in the genocide of European Jewry. Stripping Jews of their identity, culture, and history was an integral part of the Nazi campaign to erase all traces of Jewish life. Therefore, for many survivors and family heirs of Holocaust victims, determining the fate of stolen personal possessions and cultural property remains a vital link to a nearly erased past. The ability to trace the journey and tell the story of recovered and restituted objects allows survivors and their heirs to reclaim their long-sup-

pressed histories and experience a measure of moral justice.

### **EDUCATION ON STOLEN JEWISH HERITAGE**

Information that emerges from research and accessibility to archives can provide meaningful entry paths for students into the history of the Holocaust. Archival research can help localize the history and provide stories with points of personal connection for younger generations, for instance when researching the fates of Jewish families in their own cities. The gaping empty spaces left behind from the massive looting of Jewish cultural heritage remain painful and little-discussed memories for many families, even several generations later. Therefore, each story uncovered and told contributes to greater recognition of the enormity of the crime of cultural plunder, its ongoing societal impact, and the transgenerational consequences for the victims. The cultural plunder of European Jewry is rarely integrated into curricula or literature on the history of the Holocaust, an omission that has prevented a fuller understanding of the mechanisms and impact of the genocide of European Jewry.

### **RECOVERING HISTORY AND RESTITUTING LOOTED OBJECTS**

Twenty-five years after the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, few countries have a legislative framework for the restitution of looted property. The oft-stated goal of the Conference principles to strive for a “just and fair solution” through negotiation can – mistakenly – imply an equivalency of competing claims, rather than recognition of the inherently unjust and criminal theft of Jewish-owned property. Looking forward, it is more important than ever to name and denounce the plunder as a crime and recover the stories of the owners to provide victims with a measure of moral justice. In five countries – Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom – mediation commissions exist to judge competing claims on artworks. However, the inability of such a mechanism to regulate the return

of more than a fraction of disputed cultural objects demonstrates the urgent need for a comprehensive legal framework with legally enforceable regulations.

In Austria, legislation exists concerning the holdings of the Austrian federal government. In Germany, the coalition agreement of the current center-left ruling coalition includes a provision to create legislation on restitution matters, however, the legislation is currently stalled with unclear prospects for passage. The paucity in most countries of a legal framework and easily accessible mediation mechanisms create significant hurdles for survivors and their heirs to reclaim stolen property, even when the monetary value is limited. As interest increases amongst the second and third generation of Holocaust victims in tracing and recovering family possessions, it remains of great importance to find better legal mechanisms to accompany the process.

### **ANTISEMITISM PAST AND PRESENT**

Jewish participation in the cultural sphere in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was marked by antisemitism. For instance, despite the relatively high degree of societal integration by Jews in France by the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, pernicious antisemitic campaigns undermined careers and the societal status of Jews. The highly popular and viciously antisemitic publications of Édouard Drumont, beginning in the mid-1880s, fueled antisemitic hostility and violence. The two false treason convictions of Capitain Alfred Dreyfus, who was Jewish, in 1894 and 1899, polarized French society and intensified antisemitism against prominent Jews, such as art historian Charles Ephrussi, eroding their societal status and careers. Growing waves of antisemitism in Germany intensified sharply after the National Socialists took power in 1933, pushing prominent art collectors such as banker Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and artists such as Max Liebermann out of their careers. Jewish collectors, artists, and art dealers transferred custody of their artworks to non-Jewish owners, or sold the artworks to survive and, when possible, flee the country. In other countries, Jewish

collectors had little notice of impending German occupation and even fewer chances to save their lives and even small parts of their collections.

Many of the Nazi officials and their allies who directed and conducted the large-scale plunder of Jewish-owned and other cultural objects were art historians and museum directors, enabling the well-documented looting operations to be conducted with considerable precision and speed. The looters knew what they were seeking, selling, and buying. Often, the perpetrators returned to positions of prominence in the art world after World War II, with little or no accountability demanded for their roles in facilitating the cultural plunder of European Jewry. For instance, Ernst Buchner, who organized the 1942 looting of the Ghent Altarpiece, resumed in 1953 the post he held from 1933 to 1945 as director of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen (cf. Theresa Sepp, *Ernst Buchner (1892–1962). Meister der Adaption von Kunst und Politik*, Munich 2020). Art historian Werner Haftmann, who became a member of the SA in 1933 and of the NSDAP in 1937, curated with Arnold Bode the first three documenta art exhibitions in Kassel in 1955, 1959, and 1964, and became the first director of the National Gallery in West Berlin from 1967 to 1974 (cf. *documenta. Politik und Kunst*, ed. by Raphael Gross with Lars Bang Larsen, Dorlis Blume, Alexia Pooth, Julia Voss and Dorothee Wierling. Exh. cat. DHM, Berlin 2021; Heinz Bude & Karin Wieland, Werner Haftmann: Kompromisslos und gewaltbereit, in: *Die Zeit*, 10. März 2021).

Those who returned to live in the postwar Jewish communities in Europe lived with the double burden of an inability to recover some or all of their own family possessions of cultural value, including art, books, archival material, and Judaica, while experiencing a return by former looters in the Nazi era to previous positions of distinction. As public and private institutions start dealing more openly with challenging histories, including Nazi-looted art, greater transparency is needed regarding the role of the perpetrators and profiteers of cultural plunder and their ongoing postwar influence in the art world.

## STRENGTHENING KNOWLEDGE OF THE JEWISH PRESENCE IN EUROPEAN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

The significant role of Jewish collectors, art dealers, artists, art historians, architects, musicians, patrons, philanthropists, and others of Jewish heritage engaged in the cultural sphere in pre-war Europe has been largely forgotten. Jewish names and achievements that were removed and erased from public memory during the Nazi era were seldom reinstated to positions of honor. There is little knowledge of destroyed works of art by persecuted Jewish artists. Restitution of looted objects remains the exception, with the burden of proof generally on the dispossessed victims.

A radical shift in reference is needed to portray more fully historical and contemporary Jewish contributions to European cultural heritage. In order to do so, it is necessary to address the overall lack of knowledge in European societies today about Jewish life, culture, traditions, and history, including past and present participation in the cultural sphere. This can include action items such as the following:

1. Research, uncover, and bring to public attention more information about the lives of those who were persecuted and later murdered in the Holocaust, restoring knowledge of their manifold cultural contributions.
2. Analyze archival material from perpetrators in a manner that reflects the significance and impact of the language and content on the victims, while striving to include surviving documentation from Jewish sources.
3. Design curricula and training programs for staff and experts within academic and cultural institutions to create greater awareness of and sensitivity to Jewish life today.
4. Include information about Nazi-era cultural plunder in online websites, social media, programs, and educational modules on the Holocaust.
5. Schedule programs for internal and external audiences that address issues affecting Jewish life, including antisemitism past and present in arts and culture.

6. Initiate an active and frequent outreach to the Jewish world to facilitate a better understanding of the vast cultural gaps left behind by the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people and to break down persistent stereotypes, such as those about Jewish wealth and power.
7. Create programming to explore the trans-generational impact of the Holocaust on Jewish families, post-Holocaust identities, and the significance of Israel as a Jewish democratic homeland.
8. Anticipate and develop responses to artworks that overstretch the balance between artistic freedom and public displays of antisemitism.
9. Ensure the inclusion of Jewish experts and participants in both the planning stages of projects and programs and in the investigative and decision-making bodies that deal with Jewish life and history.

### INCORPORATING JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

It is of vital importance to integrate more fully a diversity of Jewish perspectives into the review and analysis of these and related topics. Greater familiarity with Jewish traditions and customs can aid research and assist with outreach to Jewish partners. This can prevent obstacles to dialogue such as the scheduling of events on Jewish religious holidays or a lack of representation of viewpoints from representatives of Jewish community life. Given the growing interest in issues of looted Jewish cultural property, it is time for open discussions and broader exchange to overcome stereotypes, build knowledge, and address unspoken fears that impact an understanding of and dialogue with the Jewish world.

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## Provenienzforschung im Werkverzeichnis?

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**F**ür das kunsthistorische Genre Werkverzeichnis, auch als Œuvre-katalog oder Catalogue raisonné bekannt, ist die Rekonstruktion der Provenienz unverzichtbar. In einem Werkverzeichnis-Eintrag bildet die Provenienz in der Regel eine eigene Kategorie nach den grundlegenden Angaben zu Titel, Datierung, Maßen und dem aktuellen Standort. Während sie in Werkverzeichnissen bis in die 1990er Jahre meist in wenigen Zeilen knapp abgehandelt wurde, hat sie seit Unterzeichnung der Washingtoner Prinzipien stark an Bedeutung gewonnen (zur his-

torischen Funktion der Sektion Provenienz in Werkverzeichnissen vgl. Ulrich Pfisterer, Das Genre Werkverzeichnis in der kunsthistorischen Forschung, in: Ingrid Pérez de Laborda/Aya Soika/Eva Wiederkehr Sladeczek [Hg.], *Handbuch Werkverzeichnis – Œuvre-katalog – Catalogue raisonné*, Berlin 2023, 23–35).

So erfreulich dies ist, so stellen die neuen Standards im Bereich Provenienzforschung für Bearbeiter\*innen von Werkverzeichnissen auch beträchtliche Herausforderungen dar (vgl. Ingrid Pérez de Laborda, Provenienzen in Werkverzeichnissen. Anforderungen und Grundsätze der Erfassung und Darstellung, ebd., 156–164). Wie mühselig Provenienzforschung sein kann, hat 2012 die Taskforce ‚Schwabinger Kunstfund‘ der Öffentlichkeit eindrücklich vor Augen geführt. Ein 15-köpfiges Team untersuchte über viele Jahre die Herkunft der mehr als 1.200 Werke aus Cornelius