

Foreword

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[1] In October 2018, I was invited to co-chair a session on “The Fate of Antiquities in the Nazi Era”. The event was part of the German/American Provenance Research Exchange Program (PREP), which ran from 2017 to 2019 and brought together scholars and museum professionals from both sides of the Atlantic who specialized in researching Nazi-era looted art. The session was the brainchild of Professor Irene Romano, who was one of the participants in the 2018 exchange. Among her cohort, she identified a group of colleagues who had in one form or another studied the history of antiquities during the Nazi era. Since antiquities have not so far played a big role in Nazi-era provenance research, it was quite surprising to find so many in the group.

[2] As an archaeologist and the former president of the German Archaeological Institute, I was of course well aware of the role archaeology played during the “Third Reich”. Many German archaeologists willingly took part in activities aimed at proving the Germanic roots of European culture, a key element of Nazi ideology, which was obsessed with a pure Nordic culture that the Nazis believed had become contaminated with foreign influences. Archaeologists were tasked with uncovering this original Germanic culture and stripping away what the Nazis believed were later impurities. They were hugely rewarded with funding from the regime, which increased the number of government-funded positions for archaeologists and financed digs in the occupied countries aimed at showing that the cultures of all these nations had common Germanic roots.

[3] The session within PREP approached the subject matter from a different direction: rather than focusing on archaeology as a discipline and the role of the people involved, it focused on the objects and their trajectories during the Nazi era. This widened the perspective, taking in far more than the activities of the official players. One area it shed a light on was the art market in antiquities in the late 1930s and early 1940s and use of heritage laws to inhibit the sale of Jewish-owned collections; it also looked at the buyers and their purchases, not least Hermann Göring and his collection. Other papers touched on the effects of archaeological explorations in the Near East and the effect of landmark exhibitions. During the lively discussion it became clear that this object-based approach could yield interesting new insights and was worth pursuing.

[4] The PREP session in 2018 was the starting point for this publication, which is, however, much more than just a conference volume. Authors who were not part of the original program have been asked to contribute and, while keeping the objects as a focus, the scope of topics has developed further. The range of countries covered in the contributions is impressive. There is a strong focus on the market in antiquities during the Nazi era, with several papers not only examining how the regime’s aggressive policies impacted the trade in ancient art but also showing how the market adapted. Two authors consider the effect of military aggression, in particular occupation, on specific collections. Other contributions trace the history of individual objects, thereby shedding light on the different fates both of objects and of whole collections during the Nazi era and in the postwar period. While some of the stories are all too familiar, with objects from Jewish collections winding up in public collections, they illuminate the very diverse histories of objects during the Nazi and postwar era, emphasizing the need for a differentiated, case-by-case approach and challenging generalized assumptions. Finally, all of this opens up a fascinating

window on the question of taste: Which objects were sought after, which were less popular, and did the political climate make a difference in these preferences?

[5] Although in the past decades research into Nazi-era looted art has been widespread and provenance research in this field has blossomed, the fate of antiquities has rarely been in the spotlight and is far less systematically studied. This volume makes a large contribution to filling this void. The real strength of this publication is, however, that it brings together so many different facets from which a bigger picture emerges. It is valuable not just for readers with an interest in antiquities but also for scholars studying the art market and its mechanisms; for researchers exploring the networks and systems by which artworks were dispersed during the Nazi era and studying the history of restitution; and for art historians interested in the history of collecting and taste. I believe it will become a point of reference for many future researchers studying not only the provenance of antiquities but also the looting of art, and I hope it will inspire further work in this field.

[6] My compliments go to everyone who contributed, but most of all to Irene Romano, who not only put the topic up for discussion in 2018 but also persevered in the lengthy task of making this publication happen. Last but not least, at a time when war is once more having a chilling effect on scholarly and scientific cooperation, this publication proves again the value of bringing experts together across disciplines and borders in the interest of scholarship and insight.

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