

Research into wartime provenance at the British Museum

A new website is looking at issues surrounding the theft of art during the Holocaust and Second World War. It aims to establish whether any items in national collections were stolen by the Nazis before being acquired by UK museums, galleries and libraries.

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Right: Italian Maiolica jar, c. 1480–1500. Height 378 mm. Originally in the collection of Alfred Israel Pringsheim of Munich. Permission was given by the German State in 1938 for the Pringsheim maiolica collection to be exported to London for auction; eighty per cent of the proceeds went to the German State to pay for the Pringsheims to emigrate to Switzerland. Purchased by the British Museum in 1987 from Mrs Margaret Slater.

All departments in the British Museum have been carrying out research into the provenance of their collections as part of a nationwide investigation to establish whether any items could have been stolen by the Nazis. A number of factors have stimulated the government to initiate a positive and concerted approach towards this issue, including an approach by Lord Janner of the Holocaust Educational Trust, and the fact that banks in Switzerland have recently compensated certain Jewish families for loss of money deposited there between 1933 and 1945. Museums were instructed to examine the issues surrounding the spoliation of art during the Holocaust and World War II, and in response the National Museum Directors' Conference established a working group in June 1998, chaired by the Director of the

Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota. A statement of principles was finalised and adopted by the NMDC in November 1998 and presented to the Washington Conference on Holocaust Assets in December 1998. Its recommendations included a proposal that each national museum, gallery and library should draw up an action plan setting out their approach to provenance research. An external advisory committee chaired by Sir David Neuberger was set up to review

progress and advise the working group on the actions necessary to fulfil the statement of principles. The government is also in the process of setting up an advisory panel to deal with any claims that might arise relating to the Holocaust and the Second World War. A similar plan of research action in the non-national museums and art galleries is being coordinated by Jane Weeks of the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries (formerly the Museums and Galleries





Commission) for which purpose the government has allocated a grant of £20,000.

The action plans of some of the national museums, including the British Museum, have recently been published on a website. Its main purpose is to provide information for individuals who are investigating which museum might hold material forcibly removed from their family's ownership during the Nazi period. Each museum has provided a description of its collections, a named contact and means of access. There are also lists of objects for which further information is being sought, in the hope of eliciting assistance from the public. Research continues, and the website will be regularly updated. Such detailed investigation into past ownership is a lengthy and frustrating process. There are some seven million objects housed in the British Museum, and even after all pre-1933 acquisitions and items with a legiti-

mate provenance have been eliminated from the investigation, thousands of objects remain. It is therefore necessary to prioritise the work; specialist expertise within each of the ten departments is used to decide which parts of the collection are worth investigating, and methods of research vary from one type of object to another. Very little information about the type of objects in the British Museum, and which are known to have been stolen, is available from outside sources, even though the Holocaust Educational Trust provides excellent information on historical background, and the Art Loss Register holds information on approximately 100,000 stolen art works which can be checked for a fee. The Council for Looted Art in Europe is a private organisation with charitable status which acts on behalf of claimants.

One of the most useful starting points for the research is the list of dealers and collectors who were

Above: Hans Baldung
(c. 1485–1545) *The Rape of Europa*, c. 1505, charcoal, 275 mm. Formerly from the Lubomirski Museum, Lvov, formerly in Poland, today in the Ukraine (Lviv). The picture was stolen by the Nazis in 1941, returned by the Americans to Georg Lubomirski in 1950 and sold to Colnaghi's. Bought by Edmund Schilling, it was bequeathed by his widow to the British Museum in 1997.

known to have handled stolen goods. It was compiled by allied forces as part of the restitution process at the end of the war, is now held at the Office of Strategic Services in Washington, and was published by *The Art Newspaper* in January 1999. The British Museum has used this list to check against the known former owners of objects in its collection. Where a match occurs, some suspicion must arise, although in itself it provides no evidence that an item was stolen or forcibly acquired. Nor is the list complete: American and English dealers are not included, and it is essentially only concerned with fine art objects of high value. So it is unsurprising to find from the reports on the website that the most thorough research done so far in the United Kingdom has been on collections of paintings. Two other factors have contributed here: the first is the comparatively small size of collections of paintings; the second is the nature of the material available in the field. Paintings have always attracted a good deal of attention, and, since the beginning of photomechanical mass reproduction in the 1890s and the growth of the international market since 1900, a large number have been thoroughly described and often illustrated in catalogues issued by dealers and auctioneers. Large libraries of such reproductions are maintained in London, Paris and New York. There is also a tradition of recording previous owners when offering paintings for sale, which offers greater hope of results when researching their provenances.

However, the British Museum does not collect paintings, and the provenances of its vast collections of three-dimensional objects as well as prints and drawings are much more difficult to establish. Purchase invoices have rarely been kept, and correspondence concerning acquisitions has only survived in exceptional circumstances. A considerable amount of time has been devoted specifically to the ownership history of old master drawings, which are considered to be high on the priority list. Drawings have always played an important role in the art market, and they were very popular with Nazi collectors. Indeed, Hitler is

known to have carried a suitcase of Dürer drawings with him while on an expedition to the Russian front. Furthermore, the task of checking provenance in Prints and Drawings has been made easier than in other departments since details of the entire collection of around 50,000 drawings have been entered on a computer database, including former owners where they are known. Although incomplete, this does at least offer leads in constructing a history of ownership. Investigations are currently taking place on nearly 6,000 old master drawings in the collection which have been acquired since 1933, ten of which are included in the list of eleven BM items on the website.

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The British Museum's action plan on research into wartime provenance can be seen at: www.nationalmuseums.org.uk



Left: Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758–1823) *Nude woman standing, study for 'La Navigation'*, 1810, black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 625 × 415 mm. Details of ownership are unclear between 1912, when it was sold by Henri Rouart in Paris, and 1968, when it was bequeathed to the British Museum by César Mange de Hauke.



Above: Hans von Kulmbach (c. 1480–1522) *The Magus Balthasar*, pen and brown ink with grey wash. The picture was acquired under duress by Hans Posse from Oscar Bondy of Vienna for Hitler's proposed museum in Linz. It was returned to Mrs Oscar Bondy in the 1960s, who sold it to the dealer August Laube of Zürich, from whom it was purchased by the British Museum in 1967 with full knowledge of the provenance.