

Provenance research is too expensive, museums tell Congress

The hearing concerning America's progress in returning Nazi loot to original owners discussed potential problems

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Washington, DC. The US House of Representatives Financial Services Committee convened a hearing on 27 July “to measure America’s progress in returning art looted by the Nazis to their original owners or their heirs”. Restitution experts and museum officials testified in a subcommittee session chaired by Ohio Republican Deborah Pryce.

Stuart Eizenstat, formerly of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the US, observed that “many museums now feel they have weathered the storm of public opinion and that it is better to let their lawyers handle the cases that come up, rather than to conduct pro-active research themselves”.

James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, spoke on behalf of the Association of Art Museum Directors. Mr Cuno stated that 120 of the organisation’s 170 members have Nazi-era art in their collections, and only 20—including the Metropolitan Museum, the National Gallery and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston—have reported facing a claim. Since 1998, 22 claims have been resolved and six cases are pending, he said.

Edward H. Able Jr, president and chief executive of the American Association of Museums (AAM), said that there are “not many” problematic works in US museums, describing the number of “potentially looted” objects

in US museums as “probably on the order of scores rather than hundreds of thousands”.

Timothy Rub, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, said that many US museums cannot afford the expense of provenance research, and urged Congress to allocate funds through the Institute for Museum and Library Sciences.

Congress enacted laws in 1990 requiring repatriation of museum-held Native American objects to their associated tribes, but Mr Eizenstat said that the American approach to Holocaust restitution issues has largely been to leave it to the museums themselves. He proposed that Congress “press the dilatory museums” and require that within three years all US museums post on the AAM internet database information on the 140,000 objects they have identified as having Nazi-era provenance gaps. Mr Eizenstat called for the US government to convene an international conference next year and develop an international database of Holocaust art assets.

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