

Restitution pledge by US museums remains unfulfilled six years on

Results of survey lay bare how the US fell short

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The New York-based Conference of Jewish Material Claims against Germany has published a blistering report on the lack of progress that US museums are making in researching the provenance of art in their collections that may have been looted by the Nazis.

In 2000, the American Association of Museums (AAM), the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the newly established Presidential Commission on Holocaust Assets in the US agreed that museums should strive to identify all suspect works in their collections, make the data available, and make provenance research a priority. They also recommended a central registry and AAM subsequently created an internet database for that purpose.

Over 300 US museums were contacted for the report. They were asked for information about their research concerning objects in their collections which might reasonably be thought to have changed ownership in continental Europe in the Nazi period. Of the 214 institutions which responded, more than one third had not conducted Nazi-era provenance research and a third of those that did provided incomplete information. Most of the largest institutions participated in the study, but 118 museums did not, including the Corcoran, the Denver Art Museum, the Menil Collection, the Milwaukee Museum, Princeton University Art Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The survey, conducted in co-operation with the World Jewish Restitution Organisation, reports that 151 museums have posted data on the internet portal for 18,000 objects, a small percentage of the 140,000 items the museums say may have Nazi-era provenance gaps. About half of AAM members have posted data on the portal, including most of the largest institutions, but many have posted only partial data.

The survey also found that only one third of the respondents had separate budgets for provenance research, and only 12 institutions have ever employed a full-time researcher. More than half conducting research had completed work on less than half of the relevant items in their collections, and more than one third do not conduct provenance research on loans. Most focus on paintings and sculpture, not on drawings, prints, and other objects.

The St Louis Art Museum, for example, reports that of the 866 paintings in the collection, some 315 changed hands in Europe during the Nazi era. The museum says it has completed research on 194 of these works—many with provenance gaps—and posted 168 on the AAM website.

Edward H. Able Jr, president and chief executive of AAM, and Mimi Gaudieri, executive director of AAMD, say the survey underestimates museum efforts to investigate Holocaust-era loot in their collections. Not all museums can afford to hire researchers, they say.

Gideon Taylor, executive vice president of the Conference of Jewish Material Claims against Germany, points out that the US is a signatory to the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, which state that resources and personnel should be made available to facilitate the identification of all art that had been confiscated by the Nazis and not subsequently restituted. “We are far from that goal. As the generation of Holocaust survivors slips away, it is urgent that the task of provenance research be rapidly completed,” he says.

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