Many plundered artworks entered the personal collections of high-ranking Nazi officials, while others were destroyed or sold for hard currency to fund the war effort. The most significant pieces were ultimately destined for the proposed Führermuseum planned for Linz. Despite the best efforts of Allied forces to restitute plundered cultural property recovered following the end of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of items remain unaccounted for. Whilst many of these objects were transported east following the end of the war, others were kept in newly-liberated territories and retained as war reparations. Many more simply disappeared. Although some of these missing objects may be secreted away by private individuals (such as the Gurlitt collection discovered in a Munich apartment in 2012), countless others are hiding in plain sight – hanging on the walls of museums and art galleries, or being bought and sold on the international art market. As a result, provenance research becomes an increasingly indispensable process for any and all artworks, antiquities, and other cultural objects that originated from or were traded or otherwise disposed of in occupied Europe between 1933 and 1945.

Artworks and other cultural objects are movable items and have thus become scattered throughout Europe and indeed the world. Ensuring appropriate provenance research is undertaken on these collections is, therefore, a shared responsibility of the entire European community. This is particularly so given that the development of the modern European Union arose, in large part, from the shared traumatic experiences of the Second World War and the desire to ensure a lasting peace in Europe.

THE GREATEST CULTURAL THEFT IN MODERN HISTORY: 1933—1945 IN EUROPE

THE RISE OF ADOLF HITLER AND THE NAZIS IN 1933 UNLEASHED UPON EUROPE A CALCULATED, HIGHLY-ORGANISED, AND SYSTEMIC WAVE OF PLUNDERING AND LOOTING THAT WOULD NOT ABATE UNTIL THE FALL OF NAZI GERMANY IN 1945. MILLIONS OF ARTWORKS, ANTIQUITIES, PRECIOUS METALS, JEWELS, BOOKS, RELIGIOUS TREASURES, CERAMICS, PERSONAL VALUABLES, AND OTHER CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS WERE SEIZED FROM MUSEUMS, GALLERIES, AND PRIVATE HOMES BY SPECIALIST DIVISIONS ESTABLISHED BY THE NAZIS AND THEIR ALLIES.