

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND MUSEUMS

Provenance research is an important part of responsible museum collection management practices.

(Photo: Research Symposium: Provenance / Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences)



PROVENANCE RESEARCH AIMED AT DOCUMENTING THE COMPLETE OWNERSHIP HISTORY AND CHAIN OF CUSTODY OF AN OBJECT OF ART IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF RESPONSIBLE MUSEUM COLLECTION MANAGEMENT PRACTICES. HOWEVER, DESPITE THE COMPLEX AND OFTEN INTENSIVE RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN BY MANY MUSEUMS, ESTABLISHING A COMPLETE AND UNBROKEN PROVENANCE FOR AN OBJECT OF ART IS RARE.

Understanding the complete provenance of an item is often complicated by a number of factors beyond the object having been plundered. In some instances, sale records are not retained for items owned by several generations of a single family, are lost when auction houses and dealers cease operations, or are even withheld when items are sold anonymously through third-party dealers and auction houses. While an absent or incomplete provenance does not in itself indicate that an object has been stolen or trafficked, it can raise questions as to authenticity and title. This could have serious future repercussions for both seller and buyer, particularly for Nazi-era objects created before 1946 that underwent a change in ownership in Europe between 1933 and 1945.

Although a number of the world's leading museums now have dedicated researchers committed to understanding the provenance of objects held in various collections, the costs associated with recruiting and retaining qualified provenance researchers is a major obstacle for many smaller museums. Increasing funding available to museums for provenance research, enhancing support mechanisms for knowledge sharing among institutions, promoting digitisation and open access of research information, and the creation of international guidelines are all vital elements not just in combatting the current trade in plundered antiquities, but also in redressing the effects of the genocide and looting that occurred during the Holocaust era.



Provenance research assisted in returning many of the thousands of artworks that were discovered hidden in a salt mine in Altaussee, Austria in 1945 to their countries of origin.

(Photo: Robert Posey Collection)