

PROVENANCE RESEARCH AND THE INTERNATIONAL ART MARKET



Sotheby's auctioneer Oliver Barker
awaits a phone bid on Jasper Johns'
Flag in 2014.
(Photo courtesy of Sotheby's)

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MARKET IS A VAST, SUBSTANTIALLY UNREGULATED, AND OPAQUE INDUSTRY WITH AN ESTIMATED ANNUAL TURNOVER OF OVER €50 BILLION. WITH APPROXIMATELY 39 MILLION WORKS SOLD GLOBALLY IN 2014, THE INTERNATIONAL ART MARKET PRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLE TO – AND OPPORTUNITY FOR – PREVENTING THE ILLICIT TRAFFICKING IN PLUNDERED CULTURAL HERITAGE.

The risks associated with allowing plundered cultural objects to be consigned for sale has led a number of the world's leading auction houses – including the prestigious Sotheby's – to introduce specialised provenance research divisions to investigate and report on questions of ownership and possession prior to auction. The Sotheby's provenance research and restitution department was founded in London in 1997 with the objective of investigating the 1933–1946 provenance of works of art consigned to Sotheby's for sale. Today, Sotheby's has twin restitution departments in London and New York with a global team of four and researches thousands of objects each year across its worldwide selling locations to ensure that they were not caught up in the looting, forced sale, or displacement of art resulting from Nazism and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

As an overwhelming majority of the items consigned to auction each year were created prior to 1945, there clearly remains a significant amount of work to be done to ensure that looted artworks are not made available for purchase on the open market. Whilst the predominant share of this burden falls on the auction houses and galleries that profit from the international art market, they cannot be expected to bear this responsibility alone. The key to combatting the illicit trade in plundered cultural objects is increasing the knowledge, skills, and funding available to those willing to undertake this important research. Provenance research is complex and challenging, but the outcome – the removal of a looted object from sale and its return to its rightful owner or their heirs – is an invaluable achievement in which we should all pride ourselves.