

PROVENANCE RESEARCH FOR NON-UNIQUE ART



Porcelain collection of Gustav
Leonhardt on display prior
to auction
(Photo courtesy of Sotheby's)

EXAMINING THE NAZI-ERA OWNERSHIP HISTORY OF NON-UNIQUE OR MASS PRODUCED WORKS OF ART CREATED PRIOR TO 1945 IS ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES THAT CAN BE FACED IN THE FIELD OF PROVENANCE RESEARCH. IT CAN BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH WITH ANY CERTAINTY THAT AN OBJECT LOOTED BY THE NAZIS OR THEIR ALLIES IS THE EXACT SAME ITEM THAT IS NOW BEING OFFERED FOR SALE. THIS PROCESS BECOMES ALL THE MORE COMPLEX WHEN A LOOTED ITEM IS ONE OF DOZENS, IF NOT HUNDREDS, OF MASS-PRODUCED YET CHERISHED PIECES – SUCH AS MEISSEN PORCELAIN FIGURINES AND TABLEWARE – THAT WERE MANUFACTURED AND SOLD ACROSS EUROPE FROM THE 17TH CENTURY ONWARDS.

When an item that may have been caught up in the seizures and forced dispossessions of the Second World War is consigned for sale, auction houses will often undertake provenance research into the ownership, possession, and chain of custody of that object to ensure that it can be sold without encumbrance on the international art market. While oil paintings, watercolours, drawings, and unique sculptures often come to the market with at least some documented pre-1945 provenance (often more complete for higher profile and/or higher value works), non-unique items frequently have little or no certain and documented pre-war ownership history.

One particular example of the complexities faced by provenance researchers in such circumstances could be a Meissen dish with a rare pattern that was consigned for auction at Sotheby's. This dish matches the description of an item that is listed – without an image – in a pre-war inventory of a Jewish collector's extensive decorative arts collection prior to its seizure in 1930s Berlin. As there are more than twenty known examples of this particular Meissen dish in existence, it is impossible to establish with certainty that this dish is the very one that was confiscated from the collector in Berlin by the Nazis without establishing a full and complete provenance.



Meissen porcelain on display prior
to auction
(Photo courtesy of Sotheby's)