

Final Report on the PRTP workshop in Magdeburg, June 10-15, 2012

Introduction:

A call for applications was published on January 27, 2012 on the PRTP website and widely publicized mainly via electronic mail circulated among various professional and academic institutions in Europe and the Americas. The application deadline, originally set for March 5, 2012, was extended to March 12, 2012. Those interested in participating in the Magdeburg workshop were asked to submit a detailed application through an online program accessible at the PRTP website. In order to evaluate the applications, the director of the PRTP appointed a five-person Selection Committee consisting of himself, Michaela Sidenberg, Michael Franz, Willi Korte and Agnes Peresztegi. Each person reviewed the documents submitted by individual applicants through a standardized on-line application and evaluation system provided by the Claims Conference on the PRTP website. Each application was ranked by order of preference.

The director of the PRTP made the final decision about who was to participate in the workshop following the recommendations of the Selection Committee. He notified each applicant individually of his/her acceptance or rejection in the course of the week of March 19, 2012.

In summary, 63 individuals expressed interest in the program. 40 of them submitted applications. 3 of them were rejected while 37 were accepted into the program. Three of the successful applicants were unable to come to Magdeburg owing to last-minute personal or professional obligations, while most of the individuals who did not complete their application were unable to reconcile their working lives with the schedule of the workshop but are definitely interested in being considered for future workshops.

34 people from twelve countries—Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States—participated in the first-ever workshop addressing the issues of cultural plunder during the Third Reich, the Holocaust and the Second World War, and its impact on provenance research. Their occupations included, but were not limited to: museum director, curator, archivist, historian, artist, undergraduate student, graduate student, provenance researcher, auction house employee, and government official. The languages that they covered were: English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, Dutch, Latin, Yiddish, Russian, Hungarian, Serbian, Polish, Portuguese.

The workshop wove together interdisciplinary approaches and methods with the historical context of cultural plunder and the displacement of cultural assets from 1933 to 1945. Participants were urged throughout the workshop to reflect and examine how history should be incorporated into the provenance of objects and conversely how research into owners and holders of art objects must be organized within a historical framework with special attention paid to sources, types of documents and records, and the ways in which sources can be interpreted and applied to gain a critical understanding of the fate of cultural objects from the 1930s on.

Three instructors facilitated and taught the curriculum, which took months to conceptualize and refine: Marc Masurovsky, who also is the director of the program; Willi Korte and Agnes Peresztegi. A dozen specialists came to share their knowledge with us, including the representative of the French Ministry of Culture on restitution matters, officials from the German BKA and Interpol, as well as representatives

from Sotheby's, the Art Loss Register, the BADV, the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, the Free University of Berlin, and the Arbeitstelle für Provenienzforschung.

Day One

The morning was spent examining the notion of provenance research. The group identified documents and sources needed to conduct research into the history of objects, including sources about individuals. The group also defined different conceptual and methodological approaches to provenance research that rest on the notion that objects and people are inextricably connected; in the view of the participants, research focuses equally on both. The participants emphasized that provenance research is, in part, a quest for justice and truth, and that ownership of a cultural object is a human right.

In the afternoon, the workshop participants paid a visit to the Landeshauptarchiv where archivists highlighted the challenges faced by researchers when searching for documents that either addressed cultural thefts during the Third Reich or detailed attempts by Holocaust survivors to recover their stolen property. The archivists had a difficult time identifying where one could obtain such documents for the period extending from 1945 to 1990, or during the existence of the German Democratic Republic.

Day Two

The second day focused on the international art market of the 1930s and the question of forced sales and forcible displacement of art objects under duress. We discussed how, despite Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, the international community did not view the advent of the National Socialists to power in Germany as a hindrance to trading in cultural objects and how these misappropriated objects ended up on the international art market. Meike Hopp, a young German scholar from Munich, discussed the Munich art market and the role of Weinmuller, one of the most active German auction houses during the Nazi era. Meike Hoffmann from the Free University of Berlin highlighted her database on 'degenerate art' which had been de-accessioned from German public collections. A spirited debate ensued pertaining to the possibility that works which had been de-accessioned and sold on the international art market might have been loaned to those State collections by Jewish dealers and collectors. Also, Ms. Hoffmann responded to criticism that her database does not indicate the pre-1933 owner of a 'degenerate' piece, thus hindering and complicating research into ownership of misappropriated cultural assets. In the afternoon, the PRTP participants were invited to a guided visit of the local museum in Magdeburg, the Kulturhistorisches Museum, where the curator gave an informative lecture on the history of the Museum, focusing in part on its quasi-destruction during the Allied bombing raids of January 16, 1945, and the subsequent dispersal of the Museum's collections. For some odd reason, he failed to mention that there were 100 works from his Museum which were listed on the www.lostart.de database managed by the Koordinierungsstelle Magdeburg. The evening was capped by an impromptu outdoor session in a nearby café on the art market in Poland during the war years.

Day Three

Much time was spent covering circumstances surrounding wartime plunder across Europe as well as the Allied postwar policies regarding restitution and reparations to facilitate the return of looted cultural objects to rightful owners or countries from which they had been illegally removed. Dr. Patricia Grimsted highlighted the complex organization of the various collecting points established in the US Zone of

occupation in Germany and the often misdirected returns of looted cultural assets among the Allied powers, including the Soviet Union.

The density of the historical material made it impossible to focus attention on Judaica and Jewish communal properties stolen during the Nazi years, although we did our best to allude to them throughout the workshop. Our colleagues from Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Israel contributed to these discussions and highlighted the unique nature of Judaica, its wartime dislocation, and the challenges faced by postwar restitutions. The group discussed heirless property and the complexities associated with that issue that remain with us today—what is truly heirless? Can heirless property actually become identifiable? These are some questions to be raised anew during a workshop exclusively devoted to Judaica.

Day Four

A number of specialists shared their points of view and expertise with the PRTP participants. The morning discussions centered on law enforcement—national and international—, the role of databases and digital information that document looted cultural assets, their strengths and limitations. The afternoon allowed us to shift gradually to the international art market and its ability to filter out looted cultural assets at points of sale. Lucian Simmons, senior vice president at Sotheby's, who runs its restitution department, admitted that it was very difficult to cope with Judaica items being offered for sale through his auction house, despite the fact that Jewish cultural objects represent a very small percentage of Sotheby's sales. The day ended with a private screening of the documentary, "Portrait of Wally", directed by Andrew Shea, which has been available for limited release internationally since earlier this year. The film brought together many elements that had been discussed in preceding days, thus allowing for a dynamic exchange of views after its screening, which focused in part on the events leading to the seizure of two Schiele paintings on view at the Museum of Modern Art of New York in early January 1998 and the legal and moral complexities of the case. The evening ended with a dinner for all PRTP participants at a local Spanish restaurant.

Day Five

The last day was a half-day devoted entirely to an overall critique of the workshop during which the participants were able to express their ideas about how to improve the workshop and make recommendations on how to proceed in the future. Wesley Fisher interceded to mention the desirability of forging ties between provenance researchers across borders with the hope of establishing an international network of provenance researchers. Some participants expressed the desire to register for the next workshop, asked that documents and sources be made available on the PRTP website and that a password-protected section be established on that website to allow them to discuss issues, concerns, and related matters amongst themselves in a controlled and protected environment. A suggestion was made to shift this discussion to a German 'chat room' established by the Arbeitstelle für Provenienzforschung [loosely translated as Provenance Research Working Group] which is offered under the aegis of Uwe Hartmann's office. There was discussion as to whether this was the correct way in which to continue the dialogue set in motion at the Magdeburg workshop. One of the PRTP participants is a member of the AfP and described her experience using its online 'rooms' and 'fora.' This is only the beginning of a long discussion about where we are going, how we are going to stay connected, and how an international network of provenance researchers should be organized, by whom, where, etc...

In summary, this provenance research training workshop was the first ever of its kind to take place after 14 years of inertia in this emerging and contentious field since the Washington Conference of December 1998. We emphasized history over case studies in order to provide a historical, moral, and legal context for future research on this complex topic. Participants asked that future workshops should weave in a greater number of case studies and debates so as to better grasp the complexities which tie historical research, provenance questions and the law. Some of the areas of research that participants were either pursuing or interested in exploring ranged from postwar attempts to establish a central library of looted Jewish books, a comparative study of the three main protagonists of art restitution in the postwar era—Rose Valland, Ardelia Hall, and Evelyn Tucker—focused case studies in Fascist Italy, a more comprehensive examination of cultural plunder in the Soviet Union, and a separate workshop on Judaica. Last but not least, the Magdeburg workshop and, by extension, the PRTP, demonstrated that cultural plunder, art looting, and restitution are topics that appeal to a wide variety of individuals and can be taught in a rigorous and intellectual manner as integral to our understanding of recent history, genocide, and the moral and ethical implications of postwar attempts to right the wrongs of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Hopefully, this workshop will inspire our recent alumni and alumnae to apply some of what they experienced into their personal and professional lives. Only time will tell.

Conclusion:

Future workshops will incorporate the changes and improvements recommended by the participants. The next workshop is scheduled for February 2013 in Zagreb, Croatia. A third workshop is envisioned for New York, USA; and a fourth in Jerusalem, Israel.

Marc Masurovsky, Director of the PRTP