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BOOK REVIEW

NAZI-ERA PROVENANCE OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS: A RESEARCH GUIDE

by Jacques Schuhmacher

UCL Press, 2024, 175 pages

Alexander Herman*

The adjective ‘poignant’ is rarely used to describe a research guide. And yet it is perfectly suited to Jacques Schuhmacher’s new book. It is a difficult balancing act to write a guide for professionals that can also serve as a compelling reminder of one of history’s darkest periods and the impact it still has today. Schuhmacher’s *Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections: A research guide* has managed this and more, providing an invaluable framework for researchers and museum professionals, while also conveying the tragic and relatable stories of families and the art they lost during the Holocaust.

The book sets out to contextualise provenance research and to explain why it remains relevant today. We learn from the outset that the goal is to tell the stories of those who were victims of the Nazi reign of terror, and thereby to “reinsert lost voices into a historical record from which they have been erased”.¹ The work of provenance research is therefore a commemoration of those victims, but it is also a plea for justice. We are reminded that the purpose of uncovering the dark past behind a museum object is:

not simply to add a name and a date to an object’s record for the sake of archival completeness; it serves to ensure that the Nazis’ worldview and their actions do not live on unchallenged in the galleries and storerooms of our museums today.²

The call to put a stop to the lingering injustice echoes throughout the book.

Since completing his PhD at Oxford University on the Second World War and the occupation of Germany, Schuhmacher worked at the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, where he was a provenance researcher under the guidance of Anne Webber, the Commission’s Co-Chair, and then at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he was for six years until recently. It was at the V&A that Schuhmacher established himself as a leader and public voice on spoliation, the Holocaust and restitution. Schuhmacher created the museum’s popular lecture and seminar series on provenance and spoliation, which hosted dozens of speakers over the years presenting on research relating to the Holocaust era, but also extending to topics such as collections management, museum policy and the repatriation of indigenous artefacts. He has recently become Executive Director of Provenance Research at the Art Institute of Chicago.

1 P. 1.

2 P. 1.

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Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections follows a tripartite structure: the first chapter provides an overview of Nazi spoliation between 1933 and 1945, the second presents the efforts to obtain restitution after 1945, and the third provides the practical ‘how to’ guide for researchers undertaking provenance work in museums today.

Chapter 1 begins with a background on Nazi ideology and how it succeeded in taking over the German State after the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933. What is particularly interesting for a legal audience is how Schuhmacher reminds us that the Nazis continuously relied on pernicious legislation to achieve their objectives. A series of laws was passed, beginning in early 1933, which gradually chipped away at the constitutional structure of the country and the protections it afforded minorities inside Germany, like the Jews: the Emergency Decree issued in February 1933 after the Reichstag fire, the Enabling Act of March 1933, then the Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service in April 1933, followed by the Nuremberg Decrees of 1935. This was in addition to the Nazis’ reliance upon – and then extension of – the Reich Flight Tax, which had been passed in 1931 by the Weimar Republic to stop the departure of capital and assets during the Great Depression. All of this allowed the infrastructure of the State to be twisted towards perverse ends, denuding and then expelling its own citizens, like a dysfunctional machine that starts to crunch down its own mechanism.

In this first chapter can be found a number of heartrending stories. We learn about Walter Heise, a Communist from Saxony and early victim of the Nazis, a stark reminder that political enemies of National Socialism were often the first to fall victim to persecution. We also hear about Curt Glaser, the museum curator and director, deemed ‘Non-Aryan’ and forced to flee in 1933 (the art collection he sold at auction prior to his departure has more recently been claimed by his family for restitution). And, perhaps more surprisingly, we learn about the complicity of the German museums themselves. This took the form of exhibitions that actively promoted antisemitic ideology, as well as assisting the organs of state in confiscatory enterprises. While the ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition of 1937 is widely known, Schuhmacher reveals the unsettling imagery evoked in a dreadful, forgotten exhibition called ‘The Eternal Jew’ at Munich’s Deutsche Museum during that same year. This should make clear to any reader that museums were never neutral spaces devoid of ideological motives; they were at the very centre of shaping the political dogma.

Chapter 2 goes through the attempts after the war of obtaining restitution or reparations for what was lost. The post-1945 history, familiar to readers of Lynn Nicholas’s book *The Rape of Europa*, is covered, as is the unseemly quiet of a supposed ‘return to normal’ when it was thought, within museums and elsewhere, that the past had been settled and that the work of reparation was complete. Enter the Washington Conference and its celebrated principles of 1998. Through his work in the archives, Schuhmacher sets the scene beautifully. He explains the background and presents the cast of characters who helped bring about this watershed moment that remains highly relevant to this day. After Washington, a spotlight was shone on collections, and soon the language of ‘due diligence’ and ‘provenance’ was introduced to museum practice. The general shift is illustrated with two fitting examples: the story of Emma Budge’s collection, forcibly sold at an auction in Nazi Germany in 1937, and the special display of provenance in the Gilbert Collection at the V&A. The first of these resulted in a number of successful

restitution claims (including one involving Meissen figures from the V&A itself³) and the second was co-curated by Schuhmacher himself.⁴ The author knows of what he writes.

Equally important is the research framework provided in chapter 3. Schuhmacher is by education and training a historian – not an art historian – which equips him with the right skills for a book of this nature. He shares his research techniques in dealing with archives and primary sources, a practice with which he is intimately familiar. The research process is revealing: it begins with an initial survey of sources, which is then followed by a deep dive into museum records and an examination of the particular objects themselves. What marks or notes are included? Is there an *ex libris*, a dedication, a pair of innocuous-looking initials? Each of these could open up a broad field of research involving scholarly literature, archives and online databases.⁵ It is here too that researchers need to take stock of red flags, like the names of well-known victims of the Nazis or infamous auction houses that facilitated the sale of artworks from Jewish families. Schuhmacher also explains how to work with online databases, including the Lost Art Database from Germany (with its impressive list of nearly 130,000 works of art) and the database of ‘degenerative art’ confiscated by the Nazis which has been posted online by the V&A to assist researchers. It should be noted that many of the works confiscated by the Nazis from Germany’s own museums ended up in well-known collections (such as Edvard Munch’s *Sick Child*, originally from the Dresden State Gallery but now in London’s Tate Gallery), but are not susceptible to claims for return, as they did not involve spoliation as such.

Within this ‘how to’ guide are interwoven episodes involving artworks and other cultural objects, illustrating just how painstaking provenance research can be. This includes successful research projects from German museums, one of which involved a seemingly commonplace Louis XVI chest of drawers at the Oldenburg Museum, revealed through documentary research to have belonged to Rosa Israel, an elderly woman forced by the Nazis to sell her goods in 1940 before her deportation to Theresienstadt, where she died two years later.⁶ It is in stories like these that the research guide effectively comes to life, ‘reinserting’ the lost voices into the narrative.

While the above displays the *what* of research, equally important is the researcher’s *how*. Precisely how a researcher approaches the task will sometimes increase his or her chances of success. Schuhmacher explains this as either working backward or forward. ‘Working backward’ involves tracing a particular object from the present (or, at the earliest, from the post-1945 period) back to a point in time where spoliation had occurred. Owing to the paucity of evidence, this may not always be successful. This leads the researcher to then ‘work forward’, that is begin with the last identifiable pre-Nazi owner and try to follow the work through time, in order to reveal a potentially critical moment of spoliation. But there are times – sadly more than a few – when neither approach can expose the full story.

In his eloquent but short Foreword to the book, author and sculptor Edmund de Waal

3 See the Report of the Spoliation Advisory Panel: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-of-the-spoliation-advisory-panel-in-respect-of-3-meissen-figures#:~:text=The%20Spoliation%20Advisory%20Panel%20has%20published>

4 *Concealed Histories, 2019-20*, curated by Alice Minter and Jacques Schuhmacher.

5 Pp. 84-100.

6 See pp. 87-89.

writes of “the unfinished nature of the archival”, and this gives us a notion of the difficulty of Schuhmacher’s task, both in his professional work and with this book. Archives almost never live up to their promise as complete, comprehensive records that offer tidy responses to the questions set by researchers. Seeking historical truth in an archive is by no means straightforward. Researchers often reach dead-ends, or are able only to uncover partial facts behind a particular event. An example familiar to Schuhmacher is an eighteenth-century snuffbox in the Gilbert Collection that was found to have belonged to the well-known Gutmann collection in the early twentieth century, but nothing is known of its whereabouts between 1912 and 1987, when it was acquired by the Gilbert Collection’s founder, Arthur Gilbert. In addition, many archives remain perpetually inaccessible: with discernible frustration, Schuhmacher mentions on several occasions that archives of private entities (auction houses, for example) are rarely open to the public, and there is no law that forces them to be accessible. This makes it continually challenging for provenance researchers to do their jobs.

In such an imperfect environment, when does provenance research come to its natural end? It is sometimes said that uncovering the provenance of a work is theoretically limitless: there is always more research to be done. Knowing when to draw the line must inevitably become part of the mindset of the researcher. Either that or it remains within the ethical prerogative of the institution that employs the researcher. What happens, for instance, when the known history of a museum piece contains gaps in relation to purported spoliation, where the known facts make it difficult to decide whether a particular loss was forced or voluntary? Or it may be impossible to know with absolute certainty whether a looted painting had belonged, by 1933, to a particular family whose heirs now claim it. Where do we draw the line? When does an institution decide to make that ethical leap and reconstitute the work?

While important for any consideration of provenance research into the Nazi era, the subject of restitution remains a discrete issue. Schuhmacher does not dwell on the legal or moral arguments for returning art to relatives of Holocaust victims; that is not his purpose. At least one example in the book involves an object that was found to have been spoliated, but was not subsequently restituted. This was the case with the ‘Blerzy’ gold box in the Gilbert collection (not to be confused with the Gutmann snuffbox mentioned above). It was found through research that the box had been sold by Maximilian von Goldschmidt-Rothschild under duress to the city of Frankfurt during the notorious Kristallnacht of 1938: it was clearly ‘spoliated’. But, after further research, it was discovered in the Frankfurt archives that the box had been returned to the von Goldschmidt-Rothschild heirs after the War, along with the rest of his seized collection.⁷ Much later, in 1979, the box was acquired from a dealer by Arthur Gilbert. It was therefore not in need of restitution.

The importance of provenance research is underscored by the reliance placed upon it by those either making claims or deciding whether to reconstitute. Without sound research, restitution decisions made by museums – or others, like collectors or auction houses – would be meaningless, based solely on a whim or on an assumption about the history of an object. We need more than this, to ensure that decisions are made with the full understanding of the history of an object, insofar as this is possible. The task of the

7 See pp. 128-32.

researcher is to uncover that history, to the best of his or her abilities; the task of the museum is then to make the right decision based upon that research. They are two sides of the same coin.

Two additional benefits come from Schuhmacher's timely book. First is that the publisher, UCL Press, has wisely published the book in three forms: a hardcopy that sells for £45.00 in the UK, a paperback that sells for £25.00 and, more importantly, a freely-available Open Access PDF of the work.⁸ This last option allows researchers the world over to access the book free of charge, in a perfectly sensible format for those looking to make use of the guide in a professional context. The second benefit is the series of remarkable photographs used throughout the text, well over 50 in total. These include little-known historical images that show in excruciating detail specific instances of Nazi looting and persecution. They also include portrait photographs of the great Jewish collectors of art and other valuable objects from the early twentieth century, the founders of collections that would eventually be desecrated and dispersed by the brutal National Socialist regime. To see these men restored to their dignity is one of the many contributions of this wonderful book.

8 See UCL Press page: <<https://uclpress.co.uk/book/nazi-era-provenance-of-museum-collections/>>.

