
Jewellery History Today



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Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections: A Research Guide

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Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections. A research guide

Jacques Schuhmacher.

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Given and received to mark life's milestones, such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries,... and passed down the generations as family heirlooms; jewellery is intensely personal.

We all know that gems and precious metals are so often sentimentally imbued with more than their intrinsic value, but nevertheless, *valuable* they are, and theft, looting and requisition of jewellery has occurred for as long as humans have been adorning themselves with glinting metals and eye-catching gems. For any historical piece of jewellery; it will have been owned by others before. However, not all jewellery has been willingly given or fair market value received for its parting, and thus whether good 'title' has passed may be an issue of dispute.

Dr Jacques Schumacher, the Provenance and Spoliation Research Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum [now Executive Director of Provenance Research, Art Institute of Chicago – Ed.], has recently published a book: *Nazi-Era Provenance of Museum Collections*. It acts as an important reminder that over 80 years later, tens of thousands of items of art (including jewellery) belonging to the victims of the Nazis are still missing after the Nazi's looting of Europe, and that some of these items reside in public museums, with their provenances unexplored or unacknowledged.

Maria Altmann, the niece of Adele Bloch-Bauer, the subject of Gustav Klimt's 1907 masterpiece, commonly referred to as 'Women in Gold', may have eventually received the painting back from the Republic of Austria in 2006, but the sumptuous diamond necklace and earrings, worn by Adele in the painting, were last seen at lavish Nazi parties during World War II, adorning Emmy Göring, the second wife of Herman Göring, founder of the Gestapo, and Hitler's Deputy. The

necklace had been gifted to Maria for her wedding in December 1937, by her uncle, Ferdinand (Adele's widower), and was taken by the Gestapo the following June, after the *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany on 12–13 March 1938). The trail is cold as to the necklace's whereabouts now, and doubtless, as metal can be melted and diamonds re-cut, it was long ago broken up into many lesser pieces.

The 2015 exhibition, *Restoring a Legacy: Rothschild Family Treasures*, at the Boston Fine Arts Museum featured nearly 80 objects that had been restored to the descendants of Baron Alphonse and Baroness Clarice de Rothschild of Vienna, and were included in gifts to the museum by their heirs. Amongst the exquisite works were an array of high-end jewels, mostly from the late 19th and early 20th century. Ironically though, this stunning jewellery had only survived as it was with the Baroness in London at the time of the *Anschluss*, which meant it was never confiscated by the Nazi regime. Sometimes the portable nature of jewellery can be its saviour. Included in the pieces is an Art Deco brooch by Josef Siess Söhne (fig. 1). The brooch was a gift from the Baron to the Baroness on the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary on 20 November 1937, again just a few months before the *Anschluss*. Doubtless, had the Baroness's jewels been seized by the Nazis, they would not have survived to be admired today.

It is not always about the dazzling diamonds and enchanting emeralds, though. In the Weiner Holocaust Library's records of the eyewitness testimonies of the Holocaust, gathered in the mid-1950s, is the account of Mrs Tuerkheim. She recalled being visited in London in November 1947 by Mrs Senator Karpinski and her husband from Hamburg, who had spared no effort to track down and return her aunt's, (Mrs Gertrude Ruppin)



Fig. 1. *Clip brooch, by Josef Siess Söhne. Platinum, white gold, emerald and diamond, Austria, around 1937. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession no. 2013.1777. Gift of the heirs of Bettina Looman de Rothschild. Photograph © 2024 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

jewellery box, which Mrs Ruppin had given for safekeeping to a non-Jewish sea captain who lodged in her apartment in Hamburg, prior to her deportation in 1942. Mrs Tuerkheim was then able to transfer the jewels to her aunt's three children, who were safely residing in Australia.

As lovers of historical jewellery, it is important for us to reflect that jewels have travelled through time and space to be in our hands today. They have borne witness to turbulent times, and sometimes are even the evidence of terrible crimes.

Lucinda Orr is a barrister, a Member of the SJH Council, and sits on the Treasure Valuation Committee for England and Wales.