

Provenance Guide

Introduction

Provenance research was once the province of art scholars dealing primarily with issues of attribution and authenticity. But recent legal claims by heirs of Holocaust victims whose art works were looted or otherwise misappropriated by the Nazis, and claims by foreign “source” countries for objects they believe were exported in violation of patrimony or export laws, have raised awareness of the need for provenance research in regard to due diligence in acquiring works of art. Provenance research is often painstaking and not easy to do, and not every work has a discoverable provenance.

What Is Provenance?

The word provenance derives from the French *provenir* meaning “to originate”. Although the term is sometimes, incorrectly, used synonymously with “provenience,” the latter is an archaeological term referring to an artifact’s excavation site or findspot, whereas the provenance of a work of art is a historical record of its ownership. A work’s provenance comprises far more than its pedigree, however; it is also an account of changing artistic tastes and collecting priorities, a record of social and political alliances, and an indicator of economic and market conditions influencing the sale or transfer of the object. It also provides information about its attribution. Provenance research is by nature interdisciplinary. While it generally begins with art historical resources, provenance research often leads to other historical or genealogical materials.

What information should one look for when conducting provenance research? An ideal provenance provides a record of owners’ names; dates of ownership; methods of transference, and locations where the work was kept. Such complete, unbroken records of ownership are rare, however, and most artworks contain gaps in provenance.

Provenance research can be difficult and time-consuming, and must be approached with creativity, persistence, and attention to detail. The difficulties researchers encounter often involve the state of extant records. Many archives have suffered destruction or dispersal, and the records of smaller or short-lived galleries have not always been preserved. Moreover, private owners may not have saved purchase records, and sometimes no records of transfer were created in the first place. Research may be further complicated by the variety of means by which the transfer of ownership took place. It may have been commissioned; or purchased, whether from an exhibition or directly from the artist; or otherwise transferred by sale, gift, or inheritance.

Researching Provenance

I. Why is Provenance Research Important?

For Authenticity: Provenance can bolster claims of a work's authenticity. Inventory records of an object's presence in a particular collection or in the artist's studio provide strong evidence of a work's authenticity. Art forgers often falsify ownership, and for this reason, provenance history is seldom accepted as the sole proof of authenticity.

For Valuation: A complete or distinguished ownership history may have a positive impact on the value of a work of art. Conversely, the absence of a documented provenance may raise questions about its attribution or authenticity.

For Ownership: An established provenance can also document proof of ownership if legal title is contested. Transaction records and other proofs of sale or transfer of ownership may help determine the legitimacy of a sale or provide a defense in repatriation and restitution claims. IFAR's [Art Law & Cultural Property](#) Website details legal cases where provenance, or lack thereof, was a factor.

II. Getting Started

The first steps in conducting provenance research on an object are to gather whatever information is available from the artwork itself. The front and back examined for inscriptions, dates, or other marks; any alterations to dimensions or changes in support should be noted. Other information can be gleaned from exhibition stickers, collectors' marks, and transport and customs stamps.

Useful provenance information may also be found in institutional and collection records:

- Registrarial records, which generally contain information on the acquisition, loan, and transport of a work of art
- Curatorial records, which contain research on and correspondence
- Conservation files, which may include technical and condition reports

When dealing with institutional records it is crucial to document your sources:

- Make note of the materials; dimensions; signatures, dates, and inscriptions; attributions; and variations in title
- Determine whether there have been any changes to the object's condition or size
- Obtain a photograph of both the front and the back of the object
- Compile a list of any exhibitions and publications in which the work has appeared
- Record what is known about the provenance and note any gaps in ownership history

Once a provenance has been established, it needs to be recorded. Provenance information should be presented in a clear, organized, and complete manner. It may be organized in list or in paragraph form, and the sequence of ownership should be given in either chronological or reverse chronological order. Owners should be distinguished from dealers or auction houses. The source of information about each owner or transaction should be indicated.

III. General Provenance Research

A. Art Historical Resources

General provenance research should begin with the consultation of published art historical resources, including sales and exhibition catalogues. When checking citations, be aware of other versions of the object that exist or have existed in the past. Also note pendants or related works, as they often have shared early provenances.

Look for references to the artist to whom the object is currently attributed, as well as all previous attributions. Resources such as monographs, catalogues raisonnés, and exhibition catalogues should be checked.

A good place to begin is the artist's catalogue raisonné. This is a detailed compilation of an artist's work and often includes some provenance information, exhibition history, publication references, and identifying features of the work. To discover whether a catalogue raisonné for a specific artist exists or is in preparation, you can consult IFAR's [Catalogues Raisonnés Database](#).

Photo archives are also valuable resources. The most important photo archives are as follows:

- [Artstor](#) (fee-based)
- [Frick Art Reference Library Photo Archive, New York](#)
- [Getty Research Institute Photo Archive, Los Angeles](#)
- [PHAROS: The International Consortium of Photo Archives](#)
- [RKD- Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague](#)

The following is a list of general art historical resources useful for conducting provenance research:

- [FRESCO– Frick Research Catalog Online](#)
- [Getty Archival Inventories](#) (database of documents from public archives, and works in European collections 1550-1840)
- [Getty Vocabularies](#) (includes the Art and Architecture Thesaurus; the Cultural Objects Name Authority; the Thesaurus of Geographic Names; and the Union List of Artist Names)
- [Joconde](#) (database of art in the collections of French museums)

- [NYARC Discovery](#) (an integrated research tool of the libraries of the New York Art Resources Consortium: the Brooklyn Museum, The Frick Collection and The Museum of Modern Art)
- [Smithsonian Institution Research Information System \(SIRIS\)](#)

B. Researching Collectors and Dealers

Once research has been conducted on the artist in question, the next step is to determine when and from whom a collector acquired the work. It is also important to identify ancestors or heirs of the collector who also may have owned the object at some point.

There are several resources helpful for identifying major collectors. The Frick Collection's [Archives Directory for the History of Collecting in America](#) allows users to identify and locate archives relating to American art collectors, dealers and galleries.

The [Getty Provenance Index](#), a series of searchable databases comprising inventories of public collections and gallery archives. The Archival Inventories database includes inventories and other documents from the period 1550-1840, while the Sale Catalogs database comprises European auction catalogues 1650-1840.

Some subscription-based Internet resources for researching individual collectors include the De Gruyter Saur [World Biographical Index \(WBIS online\)](#), which provides biographical information about the individuals it includes. [Grove Art Online](#) includes articles on collectors, patrons, and dealers, in addition to artists.

The transfer of ownership often involves a dealer or a public auction. Dealer files are recorded in varying degrees of completeness, and the records of defunct galleries and dealers can be difficult to find. Archives of defunct galleries can be found at the:

- [Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.](#)
- [Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles](#)
- [Museum of Modern Art, New York](#)
- [Wildenstein Plattner Institute Digital Archives](#)

C. Auction Records

Auction records are generally easy to track and are useful resources for tracing periodic appearances of individual works of art. When digitized, they are searchable by a variety of parameters: title of the work, artist, medium, etc. Privacy concerns may prevent the auction house from divulging the names of sellers and buyers unless the information is printed in the catalogue, but it may be willing to forward a letter of inquiry.

When searching auction records, certain points should be kept in mind. First, library copies of auction catalogues, especially older ones, sometimes contain useful handwritten notations with additional information. Second, it is important to keep possible variations in title and/or description and dimensions in mind when performing auction record searches.

World War II/ Holocaust-Era Looted Art Provenance Research

I. Art Looted During World War II

From 1933 through the end of World War II in 1945, the Nazi regime was responsible for the confiscation, sale, looting, and destruction of millions of artworks and other items of cultural property from public and private collections throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. Most items were stolen or taken forcibly from the private collections of Jews and other Holocaust victims. Objects were also taken from public collections in occupied lands.

Some of the stolen works entered the collections of Nazi officials; others were intended for Hitler's planned museum in Linz; and still others were sold or traded for cash or other artworks. The *AAM Guide to Provenance Research* provides a historical overview of the Nazis' art "collecting" activities.

II. Restitution

The United States was closely involved with the effort to protect art in Europe during the war, and in the recovery and restitution of looted art. In 1943 the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, known as the Roberts Commission, was established. Officers of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives division or "Monuments Men" worked at collecting points where loot was inventoried and returned to countries of origin.

Post-War Allied policy called for the restitution of confiscated works to the countries where their pre-War owners resided for return by those governments to the rightful owners. Although most of these works were eventually returned to their owners or heirs, an untold number were not. Some of the unrestituted artworks made their way into museums and private collections. In the post-War years claims were made by Holocaust victims and their heirs for artworks once belonging to their collections.

In 1998, the [Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets](#), organized by the United States State Department, laid down principles for the identification of unrestituted artworks confiscated by the Nazis, free access to records and archival materials, and the publication of artworks known to have been stolen by the Nazis. In 1999, the American Association of Museums (AAM) issued "Standards Regarding the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era" for its member museums to identify and publicize possibly looted artworks in their collections.

III. First Steps in World War II-Era Provenance Research

Checking for gaps in ownership during the period from January 1933, when Hitler came to power, until the end of the war in 1945, is the first step in the prioritization of Holocaust-Era provenance research. The next step is to evaluate the gap. Was the object in Continental Europe during the pertinent period? For example, a gap between 1933 and 1938, the year of the Anschluss with Austria, is more significant if associated with Germany or Austria than it is with England or France. These dates are not absolute, however, as claims have been made for objects that left their collections in the early- or mid-1930s and may have been sold under duress.

Another step should be the identification of so-called “red-flagged” names within provenances. The most frequently cited source for these names is the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Art Looting Investigation Unit’s (ALIU) *Biographical Index of Individuals Involved in Art Looting*. The ALIU list, created after the war, includes the names of individuals who were interrogated, investigated, or mentioned during the unit’s investigation.

IV. Resources for World War II-Era Research

A. The National Archives and Records Administration

The primary source in the United States for the documentation of the looting of art during World War II is the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, Maryland. NARA holds some 15 million pages of documents relating to [Holocaust-Era assets](#).

The most important record groups at NARA for tracing art provenance include:

- American Commission for the Protection of and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas (RG239); Department of State (RG59)
- Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State (RG84)
- Office of Strategic Services (RG226)
- U.S. Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Office of the Military Governor, United States (RG260)

NARA also holds the records of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) which confiscated Jewish property in Nazi-occupied France and Belgium. Other records available at the National Archives include those of the Central Collecting Points in Wiesbaden, Munich, and Marburg. Many of these documents have been digitized and are available at [Fold3](#). The [NARA International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property](#) contains records dating from 1939 to 1961 from the archives of eleven participating institutions.

B. Selected Digitized Resources/Databases

- [American Alliance of Museums Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal](#) (registry of objects from participating museums that contain gaps in their provenance)
- [Art Loss Register](#) (private fee-based database of lost and stolen art & antiquities)
- [Cultural Plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg \[ERR\]: Database of Stolen Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume](#) (database of ERR registration cards and photographs)
- [Lootedart.com](#) (run by the Commission for Looted Art in Europe; contains a database with laws, publications, and archival records, as well as an object database)
- [Lost Art Internet Database](#) (administered by the *Koordinierungsstelle Magdeburg*, this database lists unclaimed art held in German institutions and facilitates the registration of stolen cultural assets)
- [Proveana \(Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverlust\)](#) (database for the German Lost Art Foundation, listing looted cultural assets)
- [Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte](#) (includes records of select German galleries and collections)

C. Hardcopy Publications/Resources

Bernhard, Marianne. *Verlorene Werke der Malerei in Deutschland in der Zeit von 1939 bis 1945 zerstörte und verschollene Gemälde aus Museen und Galerien*. Munich: F.A. Ackermann, 1965.

Chefs-d'oeuvre récupérés en Allemagne: novembre - décembre, 1948. Brussels: Éditions de la Connaissance, 1948.

List of Photographs of Cultural Objects Made at Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point by Photo-Marburg, Oct. 1945 to Sept. 1946. 1945-1946.

Plaut, James S. *Activity of the Einsatzstab Rosenberg in France*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Strategic Services, Art Looting Investigation Unit, 1946.

Répertoire des biens spoliés en France durant la guerre, 1939-1945. 4 vols. Plus supplements. Berlin: Impr. nationale, 1947.

Roditi, Edouard, ed. *Checklist of the More Important Paintings Missing from the Berlin Museums*. 1949.

D. Additional Web-based World War II-Era Provenance Resources

- [Commission for Art Recovery](#) (established in 1997 to spur efforts to restitute art seized during WWII)
- [Commission for Looted Art in Europe](#) (researches and recovers works of art on behalf of families, negotiates restitution policies, and provides restitution-related information)

- [Holocaust Art Restitution Project \(HARP\)](#) (documents the cultural property losses suffered by Holocaust victims and conduct research into the fate of stolen and misappropriated cultural property)
- [IFAR Art Law & Cultural Property Database- Case Law: World War II-Era/Holocaust-Related Art Loss](#) (summaries of U.S. and international legal cases relating to art believed to have been looted during and after World War II)
- [IFAR Section on Professional Guidelines](#) (list of ethical standards and professional guidelines, including those pertaining to World War II-Era looting, enacted by various professional arts groups)
- [Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project \(JDCRP\)](#) (a joint project of the Commission for Art Recovery and the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany to create a database of all Jewish-owned objects looted by the Nazis)

Antiquities

I. Antiquities and Cultural Patrimony

Both the provenance (ownership history) and provenience (findspot) of a work of art are critical to the study of archaeological artifacts/antiquities. Knowing the findspot and the object's position within the site and its proximity to other documented items helps researchers identify the culture from which it originated, its function, and probable date. Looters, however, often destroy archaeological sites and cause damage to movable, as well as immovable objects.

Several international agreements, most notably the 1970 UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* have been adopted to address threats to cultural heritage. Some countries also have enacted patrimony laws to vest ownership of antiquities in the State, while others restrict the export of antiquities. The United States became a party (with reservations) to the 1970 UNESCO Convention in 1983, with the passage of the Cultural Property Implementation Act (CPIA).

The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) in the U.S. and Canada use the threshold date of 1970 for applying more stringent acquisition standards for archaeological objects. Member museums must undertake provenance research to substantiate that an object was “outside its country of probable modern discovery before 1970 or was legally exported after 1970.”

Below are resources concerning antiquities and other cultural objects:

- [Archaeological Institute of America](#)
- [Association of Art Museum Directors \(AAMD\)](#)
- [International Council of Museums \(ICOM\)](#) (cultural heritage mediation; the site includes “red lists” of cultural objects vulnerable to illicit traffic)
- [International Foundation for Art Research \(IFAR\)– Art Law & Cultural Property Database](#) (fee-based database providing summaries of cultural property legislation from

more than 120 countries, with links to the texts in their original language and English translation)

- [UNESCO– National Cultural Heritage Laws Database](#)

II. Web Resources for Art Theft

- [Art Loss Register](#) (a private fee-based database of lost art, antiquities, and collectibles)
- [Interpol \(International Criminal Police Organization\)](#)
- [National Stolen Art File \(NSAF\)](#) (Federal Bureau of Investigation’s stolen art database)

Bibliography and Other Resources

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