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‘Heritage Wounds’ and Ideologies behind Spoliation:
The Importance of Provenance Research for Nazi-looted Art

By Lilith Charlet

Works of art, through their content and style, tell us about our history. Similarly, their ownership story and the places they have travelled through - their provenance - can help historians to understand underlying ideologies of certain periods. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime stole hundreds of thousands of pieces of art and objects all over Europe. Currently, Nazi-looted art is sitting on the walls of our national museums, locked up in Swiss bank vaults or hanging in living rooms. [1] During and after the war, these works travelled all over Europe and the USA, sometimes reappearing on the international market, sometimes hidden from their rightful owners. Warfare has always provided fertile soil for the spoliation of works of art, but the Nazi thefts, because they were driven by a desire to eradicate identities, clearly mark a turning point for art historians. During and after the war, art crossed borders, turning the Nazi-looting issue into an international one. Seventy-three years after the end of the war, I will argue that it is imperative to engage firmly with provenance research. Firstly, because looted art is always linked with deeply emotional symbolism that provenance research needs to address. Secondly, because the relationship Nazis had to art illustrates their ideology. I intend to use the term “ideology” here as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘a systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or

Lilith Charlet is a second year History of Art student at the University of Glasgow. These first two years of studying different aspects of the subject created in her an interest for museum studies and, specifically, everything gravitating around the ethics of museums and exhibition practices, leading her to consider working on treatment of war or colonial spoliation for her dissertation.

[1] Aurelien Breeden, “Art Looted by Nazis Gets a New Space at the Louvre. But Is It Really Home?,” The New York Times, February 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/world/europe/louvre-nazi-looted-art.html.

policy.'[2] Theoretical and rhetorical writings such as *Mein Kampf* created a race theory that seemed reasonable and scientific and served the National Socialist regime as the justification for the extermination of millions of people. Hitler drew on the long tradition of supposedly scientific theories of race established by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, as well as on Darwinian theories of evolution to create the leading ideology of the Nazi Party. On this basis what I mean by "Nazi ideology" is the theoretical background of racial hierarchy and the eugenic ambition of improving the Aryan race (through the destruction of "parasites") on which their action relied.

Before the Second World War, patron and publisher of the art magazine *Das Kunstblatt* Paul Westheim was a famous collector of German Expressionism.[3] Due to his radical opinions, he was forced to flee Germany for Paris in 1933. Before leaving, he entrusted his collection to his friend and lover Charlotte Weidler. 'When the German Wehrmacht troops marched into Paris on June 14, 1940, Paul Westheim was forced to flee once again – this time in a mad rush and without even … the list of his art collection with photos and reproductions.'[4] Finally, he managed to enter Mexico in 1941. All through the war and during his exile, he maintained correspondence with Weidler, wherein she expressed her anxieties concerning the fate of his collection. However, as soon as the war was over they lost contact, despite his attempts to reach her. She disappeared with the secret of the collection's fate. He died in 1963, having spent the rest of his life desperately searching for his collection, convinced that it had been destroyed in a bombing. After his death, some paintings started to reappear on the market, revealing the central secret of this case: Weidler had kept the paintings and brought them to New York. Discovering this, Mariana Frenk-Westheim, Westheim's widow, declared that she was 'glad Paul Westheim didn't

[2] "Ideology, n." OED Online, accessed March 8, 2019, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91016?redirectedFrom=ideology

[3] Monika Tatzkow and Melissa Müller, Lost Lives, Lost Art, ed. by Jacqueline Decter, trans. Jennifer Taylor and Tammi Reichel (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2010).

[4] Tatzkow and Müller, Lost Lives, Lost Art, 39.

live to see his vague suspicions [concerning Weidler's honesty] confirmed. That would have been horrible for him.'[5]

In *Lost Lives, Lost Art*, Monica Tatzkow describes in detail Westheim's dramatic story. The title of this book reflects what this specific story demonstrates: the history of Nazi-looted art tells us about human desire and emotions – about individual human lives. Art is deeply linked with questions of identity, religion, love, betrayal, secrecy, flight, death and grief. All these emotions are the 'driving forces'[6] of the quest of the dispossessed to get their looted art back. To Bénédicte Savoy, a historian of art working on heritage spoliations, 'it seems nearly impossible to write the history of heritage movements without taking into account this multiple depth of emotions.'[7] When leading raids on Jewish families' apartments, the Nazis completely emptied the rooms, stealing everything from precious paintings to tables, chairs, carpets or glasses. In a study about identity construction through consumption, Aaron Ahuvia declares that 'things we love have a strong influence on our sense of who we are'[8] and that they 'provide a connected identity from past, to present, and into possible imagined futures.'[9] Therefore, the Nazi spoliations reflect the regime's desire to eradicate a culture, religion and identity for the benefit of another and so acts as an embodiment of the National Socialist regime's racist ideology.[10] Even when these objects were not destroyed but sold or given away, Nazi theft of Jewish collections and properties are synonymous with a symbolic annihilation of these

[5] Ibid., 43.

[6] Rebecca L. Garrett, "Time for a change? Restoring Nazi-Looted Art to Its Rightful Owners," Pace International Law Review 12 (Fall 2000): 370.

[7] Bénédicte Savoy, "La mémoire restituée des œuvres volées [The restored memory of stolen art], » interview by Cristelle Terroni, La vie des idées.fr, June 26, 2015.

[8] Aaron C. Ahuvia, "Beyond the Extended Self: Loved Objects and Consumers' Identity Narratives," Journal of Consumer Research 32, no. 1 (June 2005): 171.

[9] Ibid., 172.

[10] Stephanie Cuba, "Stop the Clock: The Case to Suspend the Statute of Limitations on Claims for Nazi-Looted Art,' Cardozo Arts & Ent. L.J., vol. 17 (1999): 469-474.

families before 'ultimately [moving] at their physical annihilation.'[11] They 'stole much more than mere assets. … [They] were stealing the soul, meaning and cultural standards of these collectors.'[12]

National collections, as opposed to private collections, can be read as the embodiment of a country's desire for a coherent national identity, aesthetic and history.[13] When it comes to Germany, the notion of "German art" had been very controversial before the war.[14] 'Hitler recognized that art must play a major role in the building of his ideal German nation.'[15] Hitler and Adolf Ziegler, the president of the *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste*, led a war on modern art, stripping German museums of 16,000 works of modern art, including Kirchner, Heckel or Beckmann. [16] The Nazi regime aimed at resolving Germany's internal conflict over the definition of German art by making a clear choice: modern art was a 'disease'[17], a 'threat to German morality;'[18] it was to be confiscated, destroyed or sold away, while neo-classical imagery and architecture was to be promoted.[19] The construction of the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* in 1937 and the failed *Führermuseum* project in Linz are two examples of this attempt to present a consistent definition of German art. The choice of a classical style for this first building was not innocent. By placing collections that were supposed to

[11] Tatzkow and Müller, Lost Lives, 9.

[12] Hector Feliciano, The Lost Museum, trans. by the author and Tim Bent (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

[13] See for example J.M. Fladmark, Heritage and Museums: Shaping National Identity (Aberdeen: Robert Gordon University, 2000) or Flora E.S. Kaplan, Museum and the making of 'ourselves': the role of objects in national identity (New York: Leicester University Press, 1994)

[14] Hans Belting, "Introduction to the English Edition," in The Germans and their art: a troublesome relationship (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 1-32.

[15] Mary-Margaret Goggin, "'Decent' vs. 'Degenerate' Art: The National Socialist Case," Art Journal, vol. 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 84.

[16] Ibid., 89.

[17] Adolf Hitler, « Speech Inaugurating the 'Great Exhibition of German Art'" in Art in Theory 1900-1990, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 423.

[18] Ibid., 86.

[19] Peter Jelavich, "National socialism, art and power in the 1930s," Past & Present 164, no. 1 (1999): 256.

represent the essence of German art in a neo-classical building, Hitler clearly displayed his desire to be affiliated with classical imagery. It expressed once more that modernity with its nearly abstract forms was to disappear in favour of, for example, Adolf Wissel's idealised families or Thorak and Breker's classicised muscular masculine bodies.

Surely, the most striking illustrations of using art as a means to convey a new definition of 'German-ness' are the two 1937 exhibitions, *Degenerate Art* and *Great German Art* in Munich. If the pillages of public and private collections of modern art were not enough, the Nazis used these two parallel exhibitions to stigmatise artists even more. Partly because of their geographical proximity, these two exhibitions acted as two sides of the same coin in the propaganda agenda of the Third Reich. They both presented only art from Germany, but in two very different ways. The first one displayed modern art in a chaotic way; it presented these works as emerging from sick minds, as a timeless art that no one was supposed to reproduce. The second one, on the other hand, was full of classical imagery, of families and German people. The two, grouped together, were there to impose on the public a strict uniform aesthetic appreciation of what "healthy" and "pure" German art needed to be. It also served as a way to classify Jewish artists, and hence the Jewish population as non-German, by labelling them in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition as 'Jewish, all too Jewish.'[20] Hence these two exhibitions functioned as a way to stigmatise modern artists as being sick, degenerate, and to define Jewish identity as opposed to and incompatible with German identity. Then the art exhibited in the *Great German Art* offered what *was* compatible with German identity. In brief, these two exhibitions tried to set up imaginary frontiers of what German identity is and should be, as if 'German-ness' could be circumscribed in the same way as Germany was. By doing this, the Nazi regime attempted to artificially construct and redefine what it meant to be German.

The idealised classical bodies and families presented in the *Great German Art* exhibition emphasised the racial theories underlying the Nazi agenda. By

[20] Neil Levi, "'Judge for yourselves !' – The 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition as Political Spectacle," October, vol. 85 (Summer 1998): 44.

creating hegemonic depictions of what being German (and hence Aryan) was, they excluded everything that differed – that is what was "Jewish." These two exhibitions were an embodiment of the Nazi ideology that, using medical and biological language, promoted "healthy" and "pure" art, rather than the so-called "sick" and "corrupted" modern art. It shows how by including and excluding certain styles, art was used as propaganda to create a unique German national identity that corresponded to the Nazi's ideals. The Nazi's use of art, whether it was thefts or exhibition practices, was intrinsically linked with their political agenda and driving ideology.

Art that was looted from German and French National collections provided material to shape this ideal image. Through looting Jewish collectors and families, the regime wanted to erase them from their new definition of German identity, while national 'French culture was for some Nazi officials [and Hitler particularly] not only admirable but desirable; the idea was, then, not to annihilate it but to capture it,'[21] and to include it into this new definition. However, the distinction between the desire to eradicate and the desire to capture is not that easy to draw. Most of the works of art and books stolen in France were owned by private collectors, mostly Jewish, like the Rotschilds or Paul Rosenberg, and not by the state. While stealing the totality of Jewish families' properties was undoubtedly aimed at eradicating their cultural identity, it was also a way for the Nazi leaders to amass a huge amount of works for their own private collection or for financial reasons. In other words, the Nazis were erasing identities to build their own upon it. Erasing, or "cleaning", was at the core of the Third Reich's programme of Nazification, which started by "purging" national museums of any form of Modern art. These works were not to be seen by the public, they were labelled as unhealthy, degenerate, because they did not fit the regime's definition of "decent" art.[22]

Overall, Nazi spoliations were driven by the desire either to erase or to appropriate an identity. The importance of researching art potentially stolen by the National Socialist regime (which must involve directly and indirectly coerced

[21] Feliciano, Lost Museum, 16.

[22] Goggin, "'Decent' vs. 'Degenerate' Art, 84-92.

sales[23]) present in museums is then firstly based on ethical reasons. According to Bénédicte Savoy, 'there is something constant when it comes to forced or violent movements of works of art …, it is that the victims or those who consider themselves as victims do not forget about it.'[24] Ironically, the Nazi party ideologists started to conceive in 1940 a list of everything that, according to them, had been stolen from Germany during the Napoleonic wars: the Kümmel Report.[25] The bitterness of these sometimes real, sometimes fantasised spoliations grew for more than a century. It was one of the arguments used by the Nazis to justify leading raids on European collections. They presented these as 'act[s] of symmetrical reparations.'[26] Identities, whether they are individual or national, very often base themselves on heritage, and so its pillage is never forgotten. The violent loss of heritage is a loss of identity and represents a deep trauma that transmits from one generation to another. To describe these traumas, Savoy uses the powerful term of 'heritage wounds.' In the case of the National Socialist regime, the Kümmel Report, that claimed artefacts stolen in the early 19th century, exemplified the power of transmission of these heritage wounds. It shows how wounds, when they relate to identities, create a resentment that grows with time. Accordingly, if not taken seriously, the Nazi pillages and destruction of collections, particularly Jewish, will very likely result in a growing rancour and a feeling of injustice.[27]

It is then clear that provenance researchers have a crucial role to play in preventing this. The complex web of emotions, taboos and questions of identity

[23] Andrew Adler, "Expanding the Scope of Museums' Ethical Guidelines With Respect to Nazi-looted Art: Incorporating Restitution Claims Based on Private Sales Made as a Direct Result of Persecution," International Journal of Cultural Property 14 (2007): 57-84.

[24] Bénédicte Savoy, « L'art dégénéré 4/4 : La blessure mémorielle [Degenerate Art 4/4 : the memorial wound], », by Christine Lecerf and Franck Lilin, France Culture, May 24, 2018, audio, 49:05-51:42, https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/lsd-la-serie-documentaire/lart-degenere-44-la-blessure-memorielle-0

[25] Feliciano, Lost Museum, 24.

[26] Ibid., 26.

[27] see Bénédicte Savoy: 'if we do not take this feeling of dispossession and heritage wound seriously, we will produce a hatred … that leads from world wars to world wars' in Savoy, "L'art dégénéré 4/4," 2018.

surrounding the Holocaust-era needs to be confronted and dealt with. However, Nazi-looted art is everywhere; it has no defined borders or country. As a result, the main difficulty of leading such research is that this requires multiple skills, such as extended knowledge in international law, history of art, and the ability to speak multiple languages. In addition, dealers and auction houses are often unwilling to reveal their records and many museums are still reticent to start researching their collections.[28] Seven decades after the war, a huge number of states are concerned with these issues, which makes it even more complex and delicate.

In addition, provenance research is extremely painstaking and time-consuming, often lasting for decades and very rarely ending in restitution. Very few people can afford to hire a full-time specialist lawyer for so long, which drastically reduces the possibility of claiming restitution. Moreover, even when qualified specialists can be hired, the specific conditions of exile and war render the investigation even more difficult. This was the case for Marianna Frenk-Westheim, Paul Westheim's widow, who could never recover documents that proved her ownership rights. Under these circumstances, the ethical responsibility should not and cannot rest only on families that have been looted because this would be a second punishment for them. Therefore it is urgent that governments continue to take legal action, such as the Washington Principles[29], regarding Holocaust-era provenance research, in order to promote international cooperation, more accessible and transparent archives.[30] Heritage

[28] Jonathan Petropoulos, "Art Dealer Networks in the Third Reich and in the Postwar Period," Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 52 (2016): 546-565.

[29] The Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art were ratified by the 44 countries that participated in the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets in December 1998. They define how museums should be working towards identification and restitution of art looted by the Nazis.
https://www.lootedartcommission.com/Washington-principles

[30] see for example Cuba, « Stop the Clock » and Andrew Adler, "Expanding the Scope of Museums' Ethical Guidelines With Respect to Nazi-looted Art: Incorporating Restitution Claims Based on Private Sales Made as a Direct Result of Persecution," International Journal of Cultural Property 14 (2007): 57-84.

wounds cannot be healed, but the current 'historical amnesia'[31] surrounding Nazi-looted art research as well as the financial difficulties to lead this research leave very few possibilities for the victims to at least move on. Institutions, however, can engage with provenance research. When they do finally welcome restitution claims, they symbolically agree to face their past and accept their responsibility. Furthermore, when Jewish individuals now ask for a restitution, they are still very often accused of doing this only for the financial aspect of restitutions.[32] Sadly, this shows how antisemitism is still very much present and linked with these questions. That is why it is crucial to listen seriously to individual restitution claims and do whatever we can to restore works of art when required. By doing so, institutions not only take their responsibility, but also symbolically stand against antisemitism. For all of these reasons, art historians and nations have to use the powerful tool that provenance research is to deal with the complex emotional symbolism linked to Nazi-looted art and the Second World War more broadly.

Besides helping to address heritage wounds, researching the provenance of pieces of art provides us with details about the collecting practices of different periods. In the case of Nazi-looted art, precise records of a paintings' ownership highlight what kind of art was valued by the Nazis and what it says about their definition of being German. As stated previously, the Nazis' raids were unquestionably striving for the destruction of individual identities, mainly Jewish. Moreover, modernity, as well as everything labelled "unhealthy" by Hitler, was associated with Jewishness, even if the artist was not Jewish. Hitler and the Nazi leaders' actions regarding art were not just about aesthetics, they were clearly political. The *Degenerate Art* and *Great German Art* Munich exhibitions were designed as propaganda[33]. Art was propaganda.

Provenance research has allowed art historians to understand these mechanisms. Studying the story of individual pieces of art illuminates the ideologies behind collecting and exhibiting practices. It is one of the most

[31] Petropoulos, "Art Dealer Networks," 563.

[32] Tatzkow and Müller, Lost Lives, 7.

[33] Neli, « 'Judge for yourselves !' »

important art historical disciplines because tracing the history of collection and individual artwork that travelled from one hand to another and that sometimes crossed many national frontiers is the basis on which every historian of art writes. In the case of Nazi-looted art however, its implications are not only historical, but also address urging ethical and emotional needs. In this sense, the Second World War lootings of art mark a turning point for the practice of art history by exposing the significance of provenance research. Rightful owners of looted art need to be given back the cultural space and existence that was stolen from them during the war and our only way to achieve this is through in-depth provenance research. Even if Nazi thefts are some of the most spectacular examples of violent lootings, this does not only apply to art stolen at that time. Currently, voices are rising up to demand the investigations and eventually restitution of art acquired in colonised countries. In 2018, Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr tackled these issues in a ground-breaking report asking for the immediate restitution of art stolen by French colonists in Africa.[34] There is still a long way to go in rethinking our museum collection with more consideration for ethics and provenance research will doubtlessly need to be part of this process.

[34] Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle [Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage. Towards new relational ethics] (Paris : Ministère de la Culture, 2018), pdf, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_fr.pdf

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