

The search for Nazi-confiscated property

Provenance research in Saxony-Anhalt

Report on conference of December 12, 2016, at the Kulturhistorisches Museum Magdeburg

Two key ideas motivated the German Lost Art Foundation to organize a conference on the subject of provenance research in Saxony-Anhalt. On the one hand, the Foundation wanted to officially introduce itself in Magdeburg, the city in which it is based, and on the other it wanted to publicize what had been achieved so far and encourage all cultural heritage institutions in Saxony-Anhalt to engage in provenance research with regard to Nazi-confiscated property in their holdings and contact the Foundation with any questions or problems.

Two longer-term projects, funded by the Foundation, have been carried out in Saxony-Anhalt since 2008 and the findings of these were presented by the project workers.

From 2013 to the end of 2016, a project at Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg was conducted in cooperation with the Landesarchiv Magdeburg (Regional Archives, Magdeburg). It focused on the role of auctioneers in Saxony and the Province of Saxony with regard to the utilization of property belonging to Jewish citizens who had emigrated or been deported. The participants of the project-based seminars examined a total of 1,200 files which they described in detail, thus making the contents of the files fully searchable. At the end of the project, a final evaluation of the compiled data sheets was undertaken by the students. A network of local profiteers was revealed as a result of the work carried out.

Susanna Köller, who conducted provenance research at Stiftung Moritzburg in Halle (Saale) from 2011 to 2013, used some of the objects that had been investigated to demonstrate how the research could be a laborious and sometimes fruitless process. Over the course of time and with the increasing digitization of sources, new evidence on the researched works is always emerging unexpectedly, emphasizing the importance of creating staff posts in the provenance research field. Although the project at Moritzburg mainly focused on paintings and graphic prints, a bundle of silver items was also investigated during the project period and is now awaiting restitution.

The Kulturhistorisches Museum at Schloss Merseburg carried out provenance research into its holdings on its own initiative in 2014. While no suspicious items were identified as being cultural assets seized as a result of Nazi persecution, the research did bring to light the museum's collection policy during the GDR period, which is considered problematic from today's perspective. Museums and libraries will confront questions regarding this subject with the aid of the source material in the (local) archives and the support of the Foundation in the coming years.

The "initial check" project led by the Saxony-Anhalt museum association has been carrying out an initial review of the stocktaking in five small museums since 2016. Provenance researcher Mathias Deinert presented the findings he had uncovered in Aschersleben, Salzwedel and Stendal. In addition to individual items of Judaica, he had mainly found Masonic items and had been able to partially

reconstruct their origin and the history of the lodges to which they related. He had also investigated Museum Schloss Moritzburg Zeitz and the holdings of the Gleimhaus in Halberstadt.

Provenance research activities in Saxony-Anhalt need to be strengthened and consolidated. Objects that are potentially cultural assets seized through Nazi persecution should be repeatedly re-examined with regard to their origin, so it is desirable to establish provenance research on a permanent basis. The numerous indications of Nazi-confiscated property in small institutions illustrates that the initial check project is a successful concept when it comes to reaching smaller institutions, and will possibly also include those in the neighboring federal states of Thuringia and Saxony in the future. The Landesverband Sachsen-Anhalt in the Deutscher Bibliotheksverband e. V. will—with support from the Foundation—carry out an initial check for the first time in five municipal libraries in Saxony-Anhalt from mid-2017. However, the large libraries and foundations are also still obliged to commit themselves to search for Nazi-confiscated property.

Nadine Bauer,
German Lost Art Foundation