

Initial Framework for Research into Cultural Assets Seized in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR

As at: February 6, 2017

I. The Task

“The restitution of art and cultural assets seized from their rightful owners by the authorities in the former Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR is a task that has not yet been completed. In these cases too, provenance research must be strengthened in order to clarify the claims of former owners.”
(2013 Coalition Agreement, 4.3 Culture, Media and Sport)

“The executive board is tasked with drafting the initial framework of a funding concept for research into cultural assets confiscated or lost as a result of persecution and arbitrary action in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR. The Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in Berlin, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia will also participate.”
(Decision of the Foundation Board of the German Lost Art Foundation, January 22, 2015)

II. Procedure

Representatives from the following institutions took part in a brainstorming session organized by the German Lost Art Foundation on October 28, 2015, in Berlin:

- the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs from all states of the former East Germany,
- the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media,
- the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States,
- the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation,
- the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden,
- the Saxony-Anhalt state archive,
- the Federal Office for Central Services and Unresolved Property Issues, and
- a specialized lawyer
- (the Federal Archives was excused).

The 1949–89 Working Group of the Conference of National Cultural Institutions (KNK) took the opportunity to give the German Lost Art Foundation a Key Issues paper on provenance research for the period 1949–1989.

A working group led by the German Lost Art Foundation was formed to prepare this framework and to compile ideas for the specialist public conference scheduled for November 21, 2016, in Berlin. At this conference, conceived by Uwe M. Schneede (voluntary executive board of the German Lost Art Foundation) and Uwe Hartmann (head of the Provenance Research Department at the German Lost Art Foundation), representatives from the following institutions took part as speakers:

- Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
- Stiftung Dome und Schlösser in Sachsen-Anhalt
- Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg
- Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin
- Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation/Zentralarchiv
- German Lost Art Foundation

Representatives of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service, the Federal Archives, and the Institute for Museum Research were also present.

III. Requirements

As had become apparent, case studies and comprehensive overviews were lacking in the following areas:

1. “Schloßbergung” (palace salvage) i.e. the emptying of manor houses and palaces as part of land reform measures in the Soviet Occupation Zone
2. The 1962 “Aktion Licht” operation (conspiratorial opening of safes that had been closed for a long time, carried out by the GDR Ministry of State Security) and vault administration by the GDR Ministry of Finance
3. The role of the museums and the need for holdings research (identification of confiscated cultural assets)
4. The expropriation of private collectors and “reutilization” by state company Kunst & Antiquitäten GmbH
5. Kommerzielle Koordinierung (KoKo) and the private art trade in the West
6. The role of the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Property
7. The identification of book stocks and the integration (utilization) of findings

The request was once again made to open up the Lost Art Database at the German Lost Art Foundation. Access to the relevant archive records is crucially important for future research, especially those records relating to the activities of the KoKo.

IV. Initial Measures

The following measures are initially envisaged:

1. Basic research

Research is to be conducted into “Aktion Licht” and vault administration as representative examples. A research project in collaboration with the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and in conjunction with an institute of history is being considered. The structures and mechanisms are to be investigated as illustrative examples. When these are known, individual cases can be classified.

2. Holdings research

The relevant project funding will enable research on individual objects or groups of objects in museums, libraries and archives. The institutions will be informed of the possibilities for funding research into their own holdings and also encouraged to undertake provenance research in this field.

3. Archives

At the Federal Archives, the KoKo holdings have been opened up since April 2016 in agreement with the working group.

In the near future, a finding aid will be produced in conjunction with the German Lost Art Foundation on further archive documents relating to this at the Stasi Records Agency. This will vastly improve the conditions for research.

4. Lost Art Database

Preparations are under way to open up the Lost Art Database.

5. Further training

Provenance researchers in museums, libraries and archives must receive systematic further training on issues relating to the investigation of expropriations in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR. Inclusion of the subject in existing or planned training activities.

Work can now begin using the funding provided for 2017 from the Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

It is essential that issues relating to Nazi-confiscated property and to expropriations in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR are kept strictly separate – Nazi-confiscated property unequivocally remains the Foundation's priority.

It should also be emphasized that the work is not about restitutions, but about research and the relevant funding opportunities.

Moreover, these issues relate to Germany as a whole, because confiscation of property in the former East Germany was primarily undertaken to generate hard currency in the West.