

Report on Nazi Art Theft in Occupied Europe (1940–1944)

Abstract

As a matter of state policy, as German forces entered the territories of conquered European countries, occupation forces acted quickly to locate and capture cultural artifacts from museums, schools, and private homes. In almost every case, the liquidation of Jewish cultural and financial assets held primacy for German officials, and occupation authorities set to work immediately to dispossess Jews of their homes and valuables, including art. As this document points out, this plundering was carried out as a direct order from Hitler, establishing a clear link between occupation policy and the highest levels of German government. This process involved more than simply the ad hoc seizure of Jewish art, however. The seizure, nationalization, and redistribution of Jewish cultural artifacts, including whole art collections, constituted a state-wide, systematic initiative that called for the establishment of a large-scale bureaucracy to coordinate these efforts. Occupation authorities established agencies specifically tasked with determining which public and private collections were most valuable.

As this report by Robert Scholz, chief of the department in charge, outlines, artwork was catalogued, surveyed, and transported back to Germany, all of which involved a high degree of detailed planning. The report provides some idea of the scale of plunder, including data on the number of stolen pieces as well as descriptions of operational logistics. In addition to bringing these pieces back to Germany for general resale, Nazi leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering acquired stolen artworks in large numbers, amassing huge private collections in the process. Goering made several trips to Paris during the occupation, taking with him nearly 600 individual works of art for his private collection.

Source

SPECIAL STAFF FOR PICTORIAL ART

Report of work during the period from October 1940 to July 1944

On the basis of the decree of the Fuehrer of 17 September 1940 relative to the seizure of ownerless works of art formerly possessed by Jews in the occupied Western territories, the special staff for pictorial art commenced at the beginning of October 1940 in Paris with the seizure of the works of art abandoned by the internationally known Jewish Rothschild family, which was also famous as the possessor of great art collections. It was not possible for the various members of the Jewish Rothschild family, nor for many other rich French Jews; to take any considerable part of their part possessions to England and America in their precipitous flight before the German occupation. The staff has not only seized very great parts of the art treasures abandoned in the Paris City Palaces of the Rothschilds, but it also systematically searched the country-seats of the individual members of the Rothschild family, such as the famous Loire castle, for art treasures and thereby safeguarded for the Reich very important parts of the world famous Rothschild art collection. The art possessions of the Rothschild's were traced not only to cleverly hidden places in the individual castles but also to depots and warehouses, as for example in Bordeaux and other coastal cities, where these art treasures had already been packed for transport to America. In this same manner the art possessions of other French Jews famous as art collectors such as Kann, David-Wlil, Levy de Benzion and Seligmann were traced by the staff and seized in their entirety.

After the seizure of the most famous Jewish art collections in Paris, all abandoned dwellings of the wealthy Parisian Jews, as well as the warehouses of all shipping firms and many other art depots of emigrated Jews, which were very often camouflaged by French gentiles, were systematically searched by

the special staff for pictorial art and very considerable art treasures found in this manner. These seizures were carried out on the basis of preliminary exhaustive investigations into the address lists of the French police authorities, on the basis of Jewish handbooks, warehouse inventories and order books for French shipping firms as well as on the basis of French art and collection catalogs. The clearly established Jewish origin of the individual owners was proved in each case in cooperation with the French police authorities and the Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service), as well as on the basis of the political secure material of the staff itself.

According to the same system, the seizure of ownerless Jewish works of art was gradually extended over the whole French territory. The investigations of the special staff for pictorial art were often made extraordinarily difficult by proven sabotage by French authorities, as well as by camouflaging of Jewish possessions by trusteeship of French gentiles covering up for the Jews. In spite of this, Jewish art possessions in the occupied French territories was seized to such an extent as to justify the assumption that, in spite of all opposition and camouflaging, the most important part of the art possessions which had been in the hands of Jews in France, insofar as these had not already been removed before the occupation, was safeguarded by the staff. *The wholesale removal of irreplaceable European art values was thereby prevented and the highest artistic products of all European nations assured for Europe.*

In the course of this art seizure by the staff in the occupied Western territories, the following were seized from 203 locations (collections).

21,903 art objects of all types, as counted and inventoried up to now.

A seizure record was made for each location, recording the origin of the objects with exact individual data. All seized art treasures were first taken to a collection warehouse at the former Jeu de Paume Museum and then to rooms of the Louvre which had been placed at their disposal. They were scientifically inventoried and photographed by scientific art workers of the special staff for pictorial art and carefully packed there by experts for transport to the Reich. These jobs were especially difficult, since the majority of the collections and individual art objects were taken over without any inventories or indications of origin, and the scientific cataloguing had to be carried out by the scientific art workers of the staff.

Since the beginning of 1943, art seizures of the staff have been extended to include also furniture seizures of the East Ministry, whereby a great number of individual valuable art works could be seized from individual dwellings and warehouses.

During the period from March 1941 to July 1944, the special staff for pictorial art brought into the Reich: *29 large shipments including 137 freight cars with 4174 cases of art works.*

These shipments were taken to 6 shelters in the Reich, unpacked and stored with observation of all conservation, air raid and fire protection precautions. At the shelters the inventories, which had served in Paris only for identification were supplemented according to scientific view-points, and the results of the scientific cataloguing were recorded on inventory lists and thoroughly indexed. With this scientific inventory of a material unique in its scope and importance and of a value hitherto unknown to art research, the special staff for pictorial art has conducted a work important to the entire field of art. *This inventory work will form the basis of an all-inclusive scientific catalog, in which should be recorded history, scope and scientific and political significance of this historically unique art seizure.*

A restoration work shop equipped with all technical aids was established by the special staff at one of the shelters, and has been occupied with the care and restoration of seized articles of artistic value as well as with their permanent observation at the shelters. Several hundreds of the works of art that had been neglected by their Jewish owners or had earlier been inexpertly restored were restored in this workshop

and their preservation assured. In addition, all seized articles of artistic value were photographed by the photography workshop of the special staff and included in a film library. Thereby not only the identity of each individual art work was recorded, but also material of permanent value for study and publication in the field of art was created. Up to 15 July 1944 the following had been scientifically inventoried:

21,903 art works

5,281 paintings, pastels, watercolors, drawings.

684 miniatures, glass and enamel paintings, books and manuscripts.

583 plastics, terra-cottas, medallions and plaques.

2,477 articles of furniture of value to art history.

583 textiles (Gobelins, rugs, embroideries, Coptic materials).

5,825 hand-made art works (porcelains, bronze, faiences, majolica, ceramics, jewelry, coins, art objects made with precious stones).

1,286 East Asiatic art works (bronzes, plastics, porcelains, paintings, folding screens, weapons).

259 art works of antiquity (sculptures, bronzes, vases, jewelry, bowls, cut stones, terra-cottas).

These figures will be increased, since seizures in the West are not yet completed, and it has not been possible to make a scientific inventory of part of the seized objects because of the lack of experts.

The extraordinary artistic and material value of the seized art works cannot be expressed in figures. The paintings, period furniture of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Gobelins, the antiques and renaissance jewelry of the Rothschilds are objects of such a unique character that their evaluation is impossible, since no comparable values have so far appeared on the art market.

A short report, moreover, can only hint at the artistic worth of the collection. Among the seized paintings, pastels and drawings there are several hundred works of the first quality, masterpieces of European art, which could take first place in any museum. Included therein are absolutely authenticated signed works of Rembrandt van Rijn, Rubens, Frans Hals, Vermeer van Delft, Velasquez, Murilio, Goya, Sebastiano del Piombo, Palma Vecchio, etc.

Of first importance among the seized paintings are the works of the famous French painters of the 18th century, with masterpieces of Boucher, Watteau, Algaud, Largielliere, Kattier, Fragonard, Pater, D Nloux and de Trcy.

This collection can compare with those of the best European museums. It includes many works of the foremost French masters, who up to now have been only inadequately represented in the best German museums. Very important also is the representation of masterpieces of the Dutch painters of the 17th and 18th centuries. First of all should be mentioned the works of van Dyck, Salomon and Jacob Ruisdar Wouwermann, Terborch, jan Weenix, Gabriel Metsu, Adrian van Ostade, David Teniers, Pieter de Hooch, Willem van der Velde, etc.

Of foremost importance also are the represented works of English paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries, with masterpieces of Reynolds, Romney and Gainsborough. Cranach and Amberger, among the German masters, should be mentioned.

The collection of French furniture of the 17th and 18th centuries is perhaps even more highly to be

evaluated. This contains hundreds of the best preserved and, for the most part, signed works of the best known cabinet-makers from the period between Louis XIV to Louis XVI. Since German cabinet-makers played an important part in this golden age of French cabinetry, now recognized for the first time in the field of art, this collection is of paramount importance.

The collection of Gobelins and Persian tapestries contains numerous world famous objects. The collection of handicraft works and the Rothschild collection of renaissance jewelry is valuable beyond comparison.

Very many works of art were seized by the staff from the luggage of Jewish emigrants in Holland as well as in the occupied territories of France and Belgium.

Work in the Eastern territories.

The activity of the special staff for pictorial art was limited in the occupied Eastern territories to a scientific and photographic recording of public collection and their safeguarding and care in cooperation with the military and civil services. In the course of the evacuation of the territory several hundred most valuable Russian Ikons, several hundred Russian paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries, individual articles of furniture and furniture from castles were saved in cooperation with the individual army groups, and brought to a shelter in the Reich.

A collection of degenerate Bolshevist art, as well as a collection of degenerate Western art, was also made for political study purposes. In addition, a rich collection of material concerning Soviet architecture was made.

25 portfolios of pictures with the most valuable works of the art collections seized in the West were presented to the Fuehrer on 20 April 1943, together with three volumes of a provisional catalog of paintings and an interim progress report. Additional portfolios of pictures are in preparation.

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