April 6, 2016

The Honorable John Cornyn
The Honorable Charles Schumer
The Honorable Ted Cruz
The Honorable Richard Blumenthal

Dear Senators,

I am writing to you in strong support of the “Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery Act of 2016.”

In addition to our efforts regarding restitution of immovable property in the former communist countries, the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) in cooperation with the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) works worldwide toward the restitution of Jewish-owned art, Judaica and other cultural property stolen or destroyed during the Holocaust. This includes such cultural property held in the United States.

We have for many years encouraged U.S. museums to live up to the spirit of the Washington Conference Principles, the Terezin Declaration, and the Guidelines of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). It has become clear, however, that when such art is located in the United States, federal legislation is needed to help ensure that the victims of Nazi-confiscated art theft will have their claims considered on the merits.

This past year we issued a Report Concerning Current Approaches of United States Museums to Holocaust-Era Art Claims, authored with the pro-bono assistance of the American law firm Dickstein Shapiro LLP. The report demonstrated that major U.S. museums have recently been
asserting defenses, such as statute of limitations, to avoid resolving on the merits claims by Holocaust victims and their heirs for the restitution of art looted by the Nazis. Use of these procedural defenses is an attempt to defeat claims for the restitution of art stolen by the Nazis by avoiding any adjudication of the substance of those claims. The report called for the enactment of legislation to extend statutes of limitation for Holocaust-era restitution claims.

(See http://wjro.org.il/cms/assets/uploads/2015/12/ReportMuseums.pdf)

We therefore greatly applaud and strongly support your efforts through this legislation to ensure that justice is afforded to Holocaust victims of Nazi art theft by affording them the opportunity to press their cases on the merits. Enactment of this legislation will also ensure that the United States continues its moral leadership in this area.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Gideon Taylor
Chair of Operations
World Jewish Restitution Organization