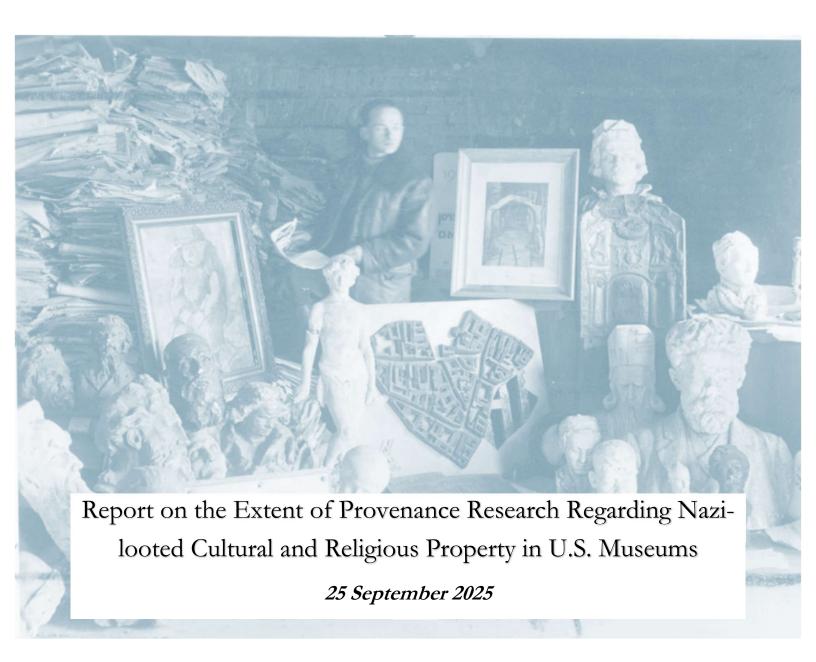
# **CLAIMS CONFERENCE - WJRO**









#### World Jewish Restitution Organization

# Report on the Extent of Provenance Research Regarding Nazi-looted Cultural and Religious Property in U.S. Museums

25 September 2025

#### Summary:

A review carried out by the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) shows that there has been very limited progress in the provision of publicly accessible provenance research on potentially looted objects that were in Europe during the Holocaust and are currently held by U.S. museums. It is estimated that U.S. museums hold well over 100,000 covered objects—which includes works looted during the Nazi era—yet barely 10% of that number (10,668) currently have publicly accessible provenance research and probably far less if one takes into account all types of art. In 2003, the American Association of Museums (AAM) [now American Alliance of Museums] created a centralized portal to facilitate accessibility to ongoing research but closed it in 2024. The stated reason for the closure was, in part, that many museums now maintain their own publicly accessible, searchable, and regularly updated online collections databases. However, this report shows that only a small portion of U.S. museums provide accessible object-level Nazi-era provenance research information on their websites and that overall accessible publication of provenance research on Holocaust-era on relevant items is very limited, underscoring the urgent need for much more intensive provenance research and far greater transparency on the part of U.S museums. Not only is publicly accessible provenance research good museum practice and important to educate the public, but it also is a critical element in ensuring a fair and transparent claims process so that rightful owners or their heirs can locate and identify looted items.

#### Background:

The United States became a welcoming "homeland for confiscated and looted art," with there being a "rush of American art collecting during the era." During World War II, looted and confiscated art reached the United States through private gallery transactions between Europe and American-based dealers, as well as through sales and auctions of so-called "degenerate" art. The U.S. art market emerged as the dominant market in the post-war era, and accounted for around 42% of the global art market share by value in 2023. Unlike

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Laurie A. Stein, The Path of Art from Switzerland to America from the late 1930's to the early 1950's: A Report of Research Results, commissioned for the Independent Commission of Expert Switzerland – Second World War, undated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> European Parliament, *Jewish art collections – Nazi looting*, 2022, online at: <a href="https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698872/EPRS\_BRI(2022)698872\_EN.pdf">https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698872/EPRS\_BRI(2022)698872\_EN.pdf</a>; for more information on the auction of degenerate art see: <a href="https://agorha.inha.fr/detail/933">https://pilot-demo.jdcrp.org/event/1939-06-30-fischerauction/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Adam Zagorin, "Saving the Spoils of War," *Time* (1 December 1997): 87 (quoting Willi Korte, consultant on Holocaust losses to the Senate Banking Committee); see also Lucille A. Roussin, "Holocaust-Era Looted Art: The Routes Into the U.S.," *IFAR J.*, 5.3 (2002): 36; Jennifer Kreder, "Fighting Corruption of the Historical Record: Nazi-Looted Art Litigation," 2012, online at: <a href="https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/688c6400-304b-4e27-94c0-457f0cddf4b1/content">https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/688c6400-304b-4e27-94c0-457f0cddf4b1/content</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Arts Economics and UBS, *Global Art Market Report 2024*, p. 25, online at: <a href="https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/download/The-Art-Basel-and-UBS-Art-Market-Report-2024.pdf">https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/download/The-Art-Basel-and-UBS-Art-Market-Report-2024.pdf</a>.

most European and other countries, in the United States most museums are independent private entities and not under the authority of the central or local government. This puts the onus on U.S. museums to prioritize provenance research.

Responses to a 2006 U.S. museum survey conducted by the Claims Conference-WJRO indicated that U.S. museum collections contained more than 100,000 "covered objects." <sup>5</sup> The AAM definition of "covered objects" referred to all objects that were created before 1946 and acquired by the museum after 1932, that underwent a change of ownership between 1932 and 1946, and that were or might reasonably be thought to have been in continental Europe between those dates. <sup>6</sup> Taking into account the museums that did not participate in the 2006 survey, the 45% of responding institutions that provided no estimates of covered objects, and a more comprehensive definition of such objects—including, for example, prints, lithographs, decorative arts, etchings, photographs, as well as the holdings of libraries, archives, religious, and other cultural institutions—the aggregate volume of cultural property is likely to be several times greater than 100,000.

An essential element in ensuring a fair and transparent claims process, and indeed in good governance of museums, is comprehensive provenance research which documents the ownership history of an item and makes that information publicly available. This not only serves to educate the public but also enables rightful owners or their heirs to locate and identify looted items. Article III of the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, endorsed by 44 countries states: "Resources and personnel should be made available to facilitate the identification of all art that had been confiscated by the Nazis and not subsequently restituted." Point G of the 2024 Best Practices for the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, so far endorsed by 34 countries, states: "Governments should encourage provenance research and projects to catalogue, digitize and make available on the internet public and private archives, including dealer records. Public and private collections should be encouraged to publish their inventories." Point H also states in part: "Provenance research carried out by public or private bodies should be made publicly available on the internet."

This current survey relies solely on publicly available provenance information on websites of 160 art museums in the United States<sup>10</sup> that were formerly participants in a central portal established by the American Association of Museums (*Nazi Era Provenance Internet Portal*, known as NEPIP, here called the Portal).<sup>11</sup> The reason for the creation of the Portal was: "By providing a single point of contact to dozens of U.S. museum

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Claims Conference-WJRO report "Nazi-Era Stolen Art and U.S. Museums: A Survey," July 25, 2006, p. 11, https://art.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/U.S.-Museum-Survey-report-07-25-06.pdf.

Based on responses to the questionnaire, there are in excess of 140,000 "covered objects". Of the 332 museums contacted for the survey, 214 responded and 118 (35%) did not meet the July 10, 2006 deadline. Among the respondents, 119 reported estimates of 'covered objects,' generally following AAM's recommendation to prioritize European paintings, sculptures, and Judaica. Overall, only about 55% of responding museums supplied such information, with some offering conservative counts and others applying more liberal criteria in their assessments.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> American Alliance of Museums, "Ethics, Standards, and Professional Practices", online at: <a href="https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/unlawful-appropriation-of-objects-during-the-nazi-era/">https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/unlawful-appropriation-of-objects-during-the-nazi-era/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art" (1998), online at: <a href="https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art">https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Best Practices for the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-confiscated Art" (2025), online at: <a href="https://www.state.gov/office-of-the-special-envoy-for-holocaust-issues/best-practices-for-the-washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art">https://www.state.gov/office-of-the-special-envoy-for-holocaust-issues/best-practices-for-the-washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art</a> [Best Practices].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> This research was conducted by examining the websites of the 160 museums that were part of the NEPIP portal. Additional information may exist, but it was either not found or not readily available to the public.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See American Alliance of Museums, "The Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal (NEPIP) Archive", online at: <a href="https://www.aam-us.org/programs/the-nazi-era-provenance-internet-portal-nepip-archive/">https://www.aam-us.org/programs/the-nazi-era-provenance-internet-portal-nepip-archive/</a>. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany was an early funder of the NEPIP.

collections, the Portal helps people seeking lost objects to refine their searches." The Portal was closed in 2024.

The survey of the Portal and publicly available museum websites included major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as well as smaller museums such as the Kimbell Art Museum and the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens.

The results of the survey are based on data collected in Spring 2025.

#### Key observations:

- 1. Online availability of general provenance information: Among the 160 museums analyzed, only 33 museums, or 21%, provide easily accessible object-level Nazi-era provenance information on their websites. Additional object-level provenance information is available for several other museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, however, the information is embedded in the general collection database and cannot be accessed as an independent listing. (See Annex 1, Chart 1)
- 2. Comparable numbers for object-level provenance information: The Portal provided information for 29,817 objects with provenance gaps. An online excel list is still available that provides data for 160 museums that were part of the portal. However the excel list provides no information on the provenance of the items that might help a former owner or their heirs identify it i.e. from whom the museum obtained the item, the previous history of ownership of the item including whether there are any "red flags" in terms of dealers through whose hands it passed which can indicate possible looting, or research that might identify the original owner at the time of the Holocaust. The 33 museums mentioned above now provide information on only 10,668 objects, which represents 36% of the objects that were previously accessible on the Portal. (See Annex 1, Chart 2a) Of the 33 museums mentioned above that provide object-level provenance information today, 15 museums, or 45%, provide less information today than they did in the Portal. (See Annex 1, Chart 2b)
- 3. Art categories registered on publicly available listings today of objects with Nazi-era provenance gaps: Out of the 33 cultural institutions that provide object-level Nazi-era provenance information, 21 museums, or 64% only provide provenance information for objects among their European collections, even though many items that were looted were not of European origin. In most cases, the museums reference the recommendations from over 25 years ago set forth in December 1998 by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the guidelines provided by the American Association of Museums, issued in October 2000, which stated that the *initial* focus of research and online postings should cover European paintings and Judaica. (See Annex 1, Chart 3)
- 4. Development of research: Among the 160 museums analyzed, a number of museums posted objects with provenance gaps early during the Portal's existence but have not since disclosed any additional research. 61 museums, or 38%, posted objects in the first three years—namely, between 2003 and 2005—and have since not updated their information in the past 20 years. (See Annex 1, Chart 4)

https://web.archive.org/web/20030713151419/http://www.nepip.org/public/info/about.cfm?menu\_type=info

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal, "About the Portal", archived online at:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> American Alliance of Museums, "Recommended Procedures for Providing Information to the Public about Objects Transferred in Europe during the Nazi Era", online at: <a href="https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/nepip-recommended-procedures.pdf">https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/nepip-recommended-procedures.pdf</a>.

5. Art categories that were registered on the Portal: The Portal limited its provenance research results to eight [8] art categories. The majority of objects were posted among the categories "paintings" [53%] and "drawings" [29%], followed by "sculptures" [8%]. Over the Portal's lifespan, the art categories were never expanded, further described or categorized, even though the provenance research field developed greatly over the past two decades and numerous other databases that were created allowed for a more nuanced description of the object and foremost the recording of additional categories of objects. The project of the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project "Persecuted Jewish Collectors" for example, works with 18 overall categories, that are divided into 64 sub-categories, taking into account past and present historical research on what was collected by Jewish European art collectors before the Holocaust. (See Annex 1, Chart 5)

#### General conclusion

The reasons given for the closure of the Portal were as follows: "In the decades since the portal's launch, many museums have developed and now maintain their own publicly accessible, searchable, and updatable online collections databases on their websites. These practices, as well as advancements in technology and search engine capabilities, have consequently made NEPIP obsolete and no longer a central registry of the most up-to-date data on relevant objects in U.S. museum collections. NEPIP has since been archived." <sup>16</sup>

However, the survey found that only a small percentage of U.S. museums provide accessible object-level Naziera provenance research information generally (and compared to the data that was once available through the central portal). The majority of museums do not offer any object-level information.

With the closing of this central portal, the museums of the United States risk losing their status among countries that make such information publicly available—such as the Netherlands and Austria (where the museums are generally under the authority of the governmental authorities and have a more robust program of provenance research)—but has also contributed to the decline in transparency regarding objects with provenance gaps in U.S. museums. Overall, this situation provides a less open environment for family members and researchers alike to easily access information on objects with provenance gaps.

Taking into account the number of searchable objects with accessible provenance information available on museum websites today (10,668), and the estimated minimum of 100,000 potentially Nazi-looted objects, it is reasonable to conclude that no more than 10% (and probably far less) of all objects that were in Europe during the Holocaust and are currently held by U.S. museums have full provenance research that is publicly accessible.

The survey clearly demonstrates that significantly expanded provenance research, along with the provision of transparent and easily accessible public provenance information, is desperately lacking and must become a priority for U.S. museums.

<sup>16</sup> Supra note 11.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Best Practices, supra note 8 at Point A states: "Art' refers to the cultural property of victims of the Holocaust (Shoah) and other victims of Nazi persecution, in public or private hands, including but not limited to paintings and other visual and decorative art, sacred scrolls, synagogue and ceremonial objects, as well as libraries, manuscripts, archives, records, and musical instruments belonging to individuals and to Jewish and other communities, organizations, and institutions."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project, "Documentation of Persecuted Jewish Collectors", online at: https://airtable.com/appv5gsbQYpYVbD9p/shrjBfpNCaO4DFjbT/tblqYPDeldvzzWNxn/viwn7WguPFZKdYjrB?blocks=hide and https://jdcrp.org/documentation-of-persecuted-jewish-collectors/.

#### Annex 1 – Statistical Overview

#### Chart (1): Online Availability of General Provenance Information

	# of Museums	Percentage
Easily accessible object-level data available	33	21%
No easily accessible object-level data available	127	79%
TOTAL	160	100%

#### Chart (2a): Comparable Numbers for Object-Level Provenance Information (Online Only)

Note: Percentages reflect the number of objects with provenance information currently posted online—either currently on museum websites or previously on the AAM Portal. These percentages are calculated in relation to the total number of objects that had been posted on the Portal, not the museums' full collections.

	# of Objects	Percentage
Number of Objects posted on museum websites among the 33	10,668	36%
museums with object-level information		
Number of Objects that are no longer available in a searchable	19,149	64%
database (portal/museum specific websites)		
TOTAL Number of Objects that were posted on the Portal	29,817	100%

### Chart (2b): Comparable Numbers for Object-Level Provenance Information

Note: This chart compares the level of object-level provenance information now available on each museum's website to what was previously available on the AAM Portal. It reflects only the 33 museums that had posted such data on the Portal.

	# of Museums	Percentage
Museums that provide <u>more</u> information as compared to the Portal	16	48%
Museums that provide <u>less</u> information as compared to the Portal	15	45%
Museums that provide the same amount of information as	2	6%
compared to the Portal		
TOTAL	33	100%

# Chart (3): Art Categories Registered on Publicly Available Listings today of Objects with Nazi-Era Provenance Gaps

	# of Museums	Percentage
Museums that only provide provenance information for objects	21	13%
among their European collections		
Museums that provide information on objects that are not part of	12	8%
their European collections		
No easily accessible object-level data available	127	79%
TOTAL	160	100%

#### Chart (4): Development of Research Data on the Portal

	# of Museums	Percentage
Museums that posted objects <u>only</u> in the first three years	61 (out of 160)	38%
(2003-2005)		

## Chart (5): Overall Number of Art Categories Listed on the Portal

Туре	# of Objects	Percentage
Decorative Art	880	3%
Drawings	8,611	29%
Graphic Art	2,154	7% <sup>17</sup>
Judaica	145	0,5%
Paintings	15,707	53%
Photographs	51	0,2%
Prints	4	0,01%18
Sculptures	2,262	8%
TOTAL	29,814 <sup>19</sup>	100%

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The number of engravings, etchings, and lithographs across U.S. museums vastly exceeds the number of paintings. These are all editioned works, produced in multiples, and collected in huge volumes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Similar to "graphic art objects," which includes etchings and lithographs, across U.S. museums, the European print holdings are many times larger than European painting holdings.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> A few objects were not categorized.

#### Annex 2 – Background information on the Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal (NEPIP)

The American Association of Museums (AAM)'s [now American Alliance of Museums] *Nazi Era Provenance Internet Portal* (NEPIP) was a searchable portal of objects in U.S. Museum collections that changed hands in Continental Europe during the Holocaust era (1933-1945). It was originally created in response to the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art and was in existence from 2003-2024. According to the AAM's website, the Portal held records for nearly 30,000 objects from 179 museums. <sup>20</sup> Even though the database is no longer available, the AAM still provides access to a downloadable Excel list<sup>21</sup> containing the archived information submitted by the various U.S. museums that had participated in NEPIP. <sup>22</sup>

#### Annex 3 – Historical background

Research has shown that the United States became a welcoming "homeland for confiscated and looted art," with Switzerland functioning as the most important conduit country for the "rush of American art collecting during the era." During the war, looted and confiscated art reached the United States through private gallery transactions between Europe and American-based dealers, as well as through sales and auctions of so-called "degenerate" art.<sup>24</sup>

Some of the former Monuments Men and Women who led efforts to recover stolen art, assumed leadership positions at some of the most prominent cultural and educational institutions in the United States. These included roles as directors and curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Toledo Museum of Art, and, for example, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.<sup>25</sup>

The art market remained limited in scope until at least 1951, with the United States emerging as one of the only countries where paintings could be sold.<sup>26</sup> The relative strength of the United States art market since World War II—accounting for around 42% of the global art market share by value in 2023—illustrates the likelihood of a significant number of the objects that were in Europe during the Holocaust ending up in the possession of U.S. museums.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Supra note 11. The online available excel list, however, only provides data for <u>160</u> museums, and not as stated for 179, totaling 29,817 objects.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Laurie A. Stein, *The Path of Art from Switzerland to America from the late 1930's to the early 1950's: A Report of Research Results,* commissioned for the Independent Commission of Expert Switzerland – Second World War, undated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> European Parliament, Jewish art collections – Nazi looting, 2022,

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/698872/EPRS\_BRI(2022)698872\_EN.pdf; for more information on the auction of degenerate art see: https://agorha.inha.fr/detail/933; https://pilot-demo.jdcrp.org/event/1939-06-30-fischerauction/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Monuments Men and Women Foundation, "The Heroes", online at: <a href="https://www.monumentsmenandwomenfnd.org/the-heroes/monuments-men-and-women">https://www.monumentsmenandwomenfnd.org/the-heroes/monuments-men-and-women</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Adam Zagorin, "Saving the Spoils of War," *Time* (1 December 1997): 87 (quoting Willi Korte, consultant on Holocaust losses to the Senate Banking Committee); see also Lucille A. Roussin, "Holocaust-Era Looted Art: The Routes Into the U.S.," *IFAR J.*, 5.3 (2002): 36; Jennifer Kreder, "Fighting Corruption of the Historical Record: Nazi-Looted Art Litigation," 2012, <a href="https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/688c6400-304b-4e27-94c0-457f0cddf4b1/content">https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/688c6400-304b-4e27-94c0-457f0cddf4b1/content</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Arts Economics and UBS, *Global Art Market Report 2024*, p. 25, <a href="https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/download/The-Art-Basel-and-UBS-Art-Market-Report-2024.pdf">https://theartmarket.artbasel.com/download/The-Art-Basel-and-UBS-Art-Market-Report-2024.pdf</a>