



The Spoliation and Restitution of Jewish-owned Cultural Assets in Italy 1938 to the Present

Bianca Gaudenzi and Katharina Hüls-Valenti

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[Trieste, Italy, A synagogue in ruins, after liberation.](#) Comunita Israelitica di Trieste. Yad Vashem
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Table of Contents¹

Introduction	4
Part I Historical Overview: from the 1938 Racial Laws to the 2001 Anselmi Report	6
Chapter 1 The Spoliation of Jewish-owned Cultural Assets During the Fascist and Nazi Eras, 1938-1945.....	6
Chapter 2 The Long and Winding Road to Restitution, 1944-1980s	25
Chapter 3 Reckonings: From the 50 th Anniversary of the Racial Laws to the Anselmi Commission, 1988-2001.....	46
Part II Research and Restitution in Present-day Italy	54
Chapter 4 State of the Archives and Research Tools.....	54
Chapter 5 Provenance and Restitutions: The Current State of Affairs in Italy.....	68
Conclusion	84

¹ Bianca Gaudenzi authored Chapter 2, 3, 4 and Conclusion (pp. 25–67; 84–86), Katharina Hüls-Valenti authored Introduction, Chapter 1 and 5 (pp. 4–24; 68–83).

Introduction

In 2001, the “Commission tasked with reconstructing the activities undertaken by public and private bodies in Italy to acquire Jewish-owned assets”, better known as the Anselmi Commission, presented its results in a 540-pages long report that for the first time provided a comprehensive analysis of the economic consequences of Fascist Italy’s antisemitic persecutions between 1938 and 1945, alongside the long and arduous reintegration processes in the post-war period. The establishment of the Commission coincided with Italy’s signing of the 1998 Washington Principles, and the public debate surrounding the publication of its initial research results was to constitute a cornerstone in the country’s long-overdue – but rather short-lived – process of ‘coming to terms’ with the crimes of the Fascist regime.²

With regard to the confiscation and looting of Jewish-owned cultural goods, the conclusive remarks of the report explicitly highlighted that no systematic research had been done to verify the potential presence of looted artworks in Italian public or private museums, and it highly recommended the promotion of research into the fate and current whereabouts of looted cultural objects, and more generally into their legitimate owners.³ Despite this, twenty-five years after the Anselmi Commission and Italy repeatedly committing to the Washington Principles, ‘many issues regarding the lost property and rights never fully restored to Jews still remain open’, as historian Ilaria Pavan had poignantly noted already in 2019.⁴ Whilst other European countries, such as Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands or Switzerland, have made considerable advancements in researching and returning cultural assets confiscated, forcibly sold or looted before and during the Holocaust, in Italy the extent of dispossessions of Jewish-owned cultural goods has not yet been fully investigated, nor have Italian cultural institutions implemented systematic provenance research in their collections.

Drawing on recent academic findings and scholarly initiatives, this report aims to offer an historical overview of the dispossessions and dispersal of Jewish-owned cultural goods in Italy during the Fascist and Nazi period, and subsequent efforts to locate and return looted artworks from the end of the

² See B. Gaudenzi, "Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy, 1989-2003" in *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 21/3 (2023), pp. 377-394.

³ Commissione per la ricostruzione delle vicende che hanno caratterizzato le attività di acquisizione dei beni ebraici da parte di organismi pubblici e privati (known as Commissione Anselmi), *Rapporto Generale* (Rome 2001), pp. 537-538.

⁴ I. Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves. Economic Aspects of the Italian Race Laws (1938-2018)* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2019), p. 287.

Second World War to the Washington Principles. It then critically examines Italy's current state of affairs regarding provenance research and restitution, highlighting both recent achievements and remaining challenges. Particular attention is given to relevant archival sources located in Italy in order to provide guidance for both local and international researchers who may wish to conduct (provenance) research in Italy.

Part I - Historical Overview

From the 1938 Racial Laws to the 2001 Anselmi Report

Chapter 1

The Spoliation of Jewish-owned Cultural Assets during the Fascist and Nazi Eras, 1938-1945

Within the context of the Holocaust, Italy's role significantly differs from that of any other European country as a result of its close alliance to Nazi Germany until the fall of 1943 and its autonomous Fascist antisemitic legislation, that officially began in 1938 and lasted for seven years, in which the country went from peace to war and occupation.⁵

The proclamation of the so-called Rome-Berlin Axis in November 1936 notably marked a process of political, ideological and cultural rapprochement of the two regimes, that culminated in the 1939 "Pact of Steel" and then into Italy joining the war alongside Germany on 10 June 1940. However, after the landing of the Allies in Sicily on 9 July 1943, Mussolini's dismissal on 25 July 1943 and the subsequent armistice on 8 September 1943, Italy turned into a divided country, with the establishment of a post-Fascist government in the liberated southern regions and the installation of the Fascist collaborationist Italian Social Republic in the Nazi-occupied central-northern regions of Italy.

Fascism's antisemitic persecutions, and more specifically the dispossessions, forced sales, and looting of Jewish-owned cultural objects on Italian soil, occurred within this complex political framework and are, thus, to be divided in two different stages: firstly, the antisemitic campaign that developed in the 1930s, leading to the promulgation of the Racial Laws in September 1938, and the following five years of systematic persecution 'ordered and overseen solely by the Fascist authorities'.⁶ Secondly, the twenty months of the Italian Social Republic, from 23 September 1943 until 25 April 1945, during which the Fascist persecution underwent 'another qualitative and quantitative leap', i.e. the arrest and

⁵ For a general overview on the alliance between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy see among others J. Petersen, *Hitler – Mussolini. Die Entstehung der Achse Berlin–Rom 1933-1936* (Thuringia: Max Niemeyer, 1973); *Die Achse im Krieg. Politik, Ideologie und Kriegsführung 1939-1945*, ed. by L. Klinkhammer (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010).

⁶ Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 19.

deportation as well as comprehensive expropriation of all Jews, in combination with the – often competing – actions of persecution and looting of the German occupiers.⁷

1.1 Antisemitic Legislation under the Fascist Regime and the Italian Social Republic

In August 1938 the so-called racial census recorded 48.000 Jews and 10.000 foreign Jews on Italian soil.⁸ Only a few weeks later, on 7 September 1938 Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) with law no. 1381 ordered first the expulsion of all foreign Jews who had taken residency in Italy after 1 January 1919,⁹ and on 18 September 1938 he publicly promulgated the Racial Laws on the Piazza Unità d'Italia in Trieste. In the subsequent years, the Fascist regime passed about 180 provisions that aimed to marginalise, exclude and eventually annihilate the Jews from Italian society. It is worth noting that these antisemitic measures were not merely anti-Jewish but were in general directed against anyone who was not considered “belonging to the Aryan race”, hence also Sinti and Roma as well as people from colonised Africa, where first antiracist provisions had already been implemented at the beginning of 1937.¹⁰

Interestingly, in previous years the Italian Fascist regime had shown an ambiguous position towards the declared racist ideology that its Nazi ally had been pursuing since Hitler's rise to power in 1933.¹¹ For instance, while antisemitic writings by Mussolini even date back to the 1920s and episodes of antisemitic discrimination increased in Italy and its African colonies in the course of the 1930s, still in 1938 the National Fascist Party counted a notable number of committed Jews among its members, who in a few cases also held political positions, for example the industrialist and senator Isaia Abbramo Giacobbe Isaia Levi (1863-1949)¹². After the promulgation of the Racial Laws some categories of Jews – such as Levi – could request the paradoxically called *discriminazione*, i.e. to be

⁷ Ibid, p. 23. On the German occupation 1943-1945 see L. Klinkhammer, *Zwischen Bündnis und Besatzung: das Nationalsozialistische Deutschland und die Republik von Salò, 1943-1945* (Thuringia: Max Niemeyer, 1993); M. Wedekind, *Nationalsozialistische Besatzungs- und Annexionspolitik in Norditalien 1943 bis 1945* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2003).

⁸ Previous data on the Jewish population in Italy derived from the 1931 general census and local reports on Jewish communities that were created upon request by the regime, for instance for Trieste in 1928 and 1937. Ilaria Pavan draws a detailed picture of the regional distribution, economic and social status of the Jews in Italy: Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, pp. 49-55.

⁹ RDL, No. 1381, “Provvedimenti nei confronti degli ebrei stranieri”, 7 September 1938.

¹⁰ See M. Sarfatti, *I confini di una persecuzione. Il fascismo e gli ebrei fuori d'Italia (1938-1943)* (Rome: Viella, 2023), pp. 28-44; G. Barrera, “Mussolini's colonial race laws and state-settler relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935-41)”, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8/3 (2003), pp. 425-443.

¹¹ See M. Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia Fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione* (new edition) (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), pp. 98-122.

¹² On Abramo Giacobbe Isaia Levi see G. Fiorentino, “The Eclectic Figure of Isaia Levi through the Documents of the Vatican Apostolic Archives”, in *Tracing Provenance in Italy. Navigating through Post-Unitarian Primary Sources and Archival Collections*, ed. by A. Cazzola, K. Hüls-Valenti, M. Schneider (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026), pp. 211-222.

exempted from the social and financial limitations due to their (previous) political or professional contributions to the Italian state, first and foremost their participation in the First World War or in the early Fascist movement. The exempt status was granted to only 6,494 Jews, a status that soon became superfluous with the increasing provisions and then with the comprehensive restrictions under the Italian Social Republic.

As a result of the antisemitic persecution in Italy, at the end of the war, 5,500 Italian Jews had elected to renounce their Jewish faith, 6,000 had emigrated and 8,265 Jews had been sent to extermination camps, of which only 837 survived. Four-fifths of the Italian Jewish community survived the war.¹³

1.2 Forced Sales and Dispersion of Jewish-owned Cultural Goods under Fascist Antisemitic Legislation, 1938-1943

Among the most significant regulations of the first phase of persecution were the ban on school and university attendance for Jewish students and the expulsion of Jewish teachers and professors from Italian schools and universities, which after a series of regulations issued by Education Minister Giuseppe Bottai (1895-1959) already at the beginning of September found its culmination in the Royal Decree-Law (RDL) no. 1779 of 15 November 1938.¹⁴ Equally relevant was the decree no. 1728 of 17 November 1938 that stipulated, among others, the prohibition of mixed marriages, the exclusion of Jews from most of the country's professional and economic life and the first restrictions on the ownership of buildings and land.¹⁵ Both Italian and foreign Jews, therefore, had to report their property, such as land, businesses and other commercial activities, and if these exceeded a certain threshold (the so-called “quote eccedenti”) they had to be handed over to the *Ente di Gestione e Liquidazione Immobiliare* (EGELI), established on 9 February 1939 with Decree no. 126 with the purpose of managing and liquidating “aryanised” property.¹⁶ Headquartered in Rome, the EGELI

¹³ M. Sarfatti, *Overview of Immovable Property Restitution/compensation Regime – Italy (as of 13 December 2016)*, p. 2 (URL: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=3272>, last accessed 19 November 2025).

¹⁴ RDL, no. 1779, “Integrazione e coordinamento in unico testo delle norme già emanate per la difesa della razza nella Scuola italiana”, 15 November 1938.

¹⁵ RDL, no. 1728, “Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza italiana”, 17 November 1938. For an extensive account on these measures see Pavan, *Beyond the Things themselves*, pp. 69-84.

¹⁶ RDL, no. 126, “Norme di attuazione ed integrazione delle disposizioni di cui all'art. 10 del R. decreto-legge 17 novembre 1938-XVII, n. 1728, relative ai limiti di proprietà immobiliare e di attività industriale e commerciale per i cittadini italiani di razza ebraica”, 9 February 1939. Ilaria Pavan illustrates that in February 1940, 7,494 reports of Jewish ownership regarding land and buildings had been filed, their expropriation however proceeded at a “snail’s pace” due to the “complex bureaucratic process”. Hence by the summer of 1943, 398 dossiers had reached the agency, and the EGELI had “entered

relied at the regional level on credit institutions to facilitate the administration and potential sale of the seized assets.¹⁷ EGELI's competencies were further amplified in the following years, becoming, for instance, also responsible for the management of the assets of enemy nationals, subject to seizure due to the 1938 Martial Law after Italy's entry into the Second World War on 10 June 1940 – a process that in many cases greatly facilitated and overlapped with the seizure of Jewish-owned assets.¹⁸

With regard to Jewish-owned cultural goods and their dispersion during antisemitic persecutions, it is worth highlighting the already mentioned decree of 9 February 1939, with which the ban on trade was issued, and which was subsequently extended specifically to the trade of antiquities and artworks, with Circular no. 63886 of 13 September 1940.¹⁹ As a consequence, Jewish antiquarians had to dispose of their merchandise or transfer their property to “Aryan” citizens. This was the case of Venetian antiquarian Adolph Loewi (1888-1977), who passed his property to his assistant Alessandro Morandotti (1909-1979) and fled the persecution by emigrating to the United States already in February 1939;²⁰ or of the Milan-based antiquarian Rodolfo Subert (1873), who was able to transfer his property to his Italian-catholic wife.²¹ Many others, however, did not succeed in passing their business to trusted collaborators and were forced to sell in haste and often under price.

Restrictions and Seizure of Cultural Goods within Contexts of Emigration or Flight

Considering the increasing emigration of both Italian and foreign Jews due to law no. 1381, antisemitic restrictions were imposed on the transfer of valuables, money and cultural objects to other countries so that they could take only little of their belongings with them.²² Regarding cultural objects the Italian

into possession of 143 properties” and had “finalized twenty-nine sales of houses, buildings, and land to third parties”, with a “net profit from sales in 1942” amounting to “154 percent of the expenses incurred”: Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, pp. 131-136.

¹⁷ The historical documentation relating to these events is still kept at several credit institutions, see Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, pp. 42-44 and Chapter 4.

¹⁸ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, pp. 131-136, as well as F. Levi, *Le case e le cose. La persecuzione degli ebrei torinesi nelle carte dell'EGELI 1938-1945* (Turin: Compagnia di San Paolo, 1998).

¹⁹ “Divieto di esercizio commercio di oggetti antichi e d'arte agli appartenenti alla razza ebraica, anche se discriminati”, Circular no. 63886, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 13 September 1940.

²⁰ See A. Bartoli, “Flagging a Red Flag: Contextualising the activities of Alessandro Morandotti between 1939 and 1945 in light of the Art Looting Investigation Unit Report (1946-1947)”, in *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 174-197, as well as L. Scarante, *Il sequestro dei beni di 'sudditi nemici' durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale: il caso della Galleria d'arte Loewi a Venezia*, M.A. thesis at Università Ca' Foscari, Venice 2024.

²¹ For an in-depth discussion of the Subert case see M. Schneider, “(Il-)legal? Kulturgütertransfer aus Italien. 1937-1945. Eine objektbezogene Betrachtung der historischen Sonderrolle Italiens“, in *Provenienzforschung in Italien. Raub, Handel, Transfer, special issue of Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart*, 1 (2025), pp. 84-95.

²² Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, p. 82. For an in-depth discussion of restrictions and severe boarder controls see M. Sarfatti, “Il contesto del caso Kaumheimer“, in *Geschichte und Region – Storia e regione*, a. XI (2002), n.1, pp. 181-192.

superintendencies soon observed a significant increase in requests for the export of artistic objects that emigrating Jewish owners were trying to take with them. To limit the emigration of Jewish-owned cultural objects Education Minister Giuseppe Bottai issued circular no. 43 on 4 March 1939, inviting the export offices to overvalue the artistic objects, so that either an export ban would apply or that at least the relevant export tax would increase, and thus generate more revenue.²³ A third option to discourage Jewish owners from exporting their cultural assets was the exercise of the pre-emption right to the State.²⁴ A fourth, even more severe option was used in the case of the porcelain collection of the industrialist Julius Kaumheimer (1880-1957), who had fled Stuttgart with his family in 1935 through Belgium and Switzerland as a result of the Nuremberg Laws, settling in Meran, Italy. In spring 1939, the Kaumheimer family obtained a visa to emigrate to the United States from the port of Naples. Upon learning of the valuable collection of 69 porcelain figurines, the superintendency of Trento ordered its confiscation by custom officers and later assigned the collection to the museum Castello di Buonconsiglio.²⁵

Additional illegitimate changes of ownership through seizure or forced sales of cultural goods occurred within the context of emigration processes through Italian port cities. Whilst Genoa and Naples have not been the subject of comprehensive studies yet, Trieste is a particular telling case as between 1933 and 1940 it became one of the main ports for the emigration of more than 120,000 (mainly Austrian and German) Jews. Many of these refugees carried household goods and valuables with them to Trieste, which were generally stored in crates and lift vans in the *Magazzini Generali* for onward shipment to their future country of exile.²⁶ With Italy's entry into the war and the enactment of the 1938 Martial Law, a general debate arose all over Italy on the management of movable and immovable property of Jews who were now considered enemies either due to their foreign nationality or – in case of emigration – that had fled through Italy to countries now considered war enemies.²⁷ With regard to the Jewish-owned lift vans and crates stored in Italian port cities, the Martial Law

²³ Ibid., p. 146. See also Gaudenzi, “Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy”, pp. 377-378.

²⁴ See Venezia, Archivio della Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Veneziano, Ufficio Esportazione, Circolare N. 43, “Provvedimenti in difesa del patrimonio artistico nazionale in mano agli ebrei”, 4 March 1939.

²⁵ For further discussion see Sarfatti, “Il contesto del caso Kaumheimer”; Gaudenzi, “Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy”, pp. 378, 391-393.

²⁶ For more details see P. Felluga, “Il sequestro dei beni degli ebrei emigranti nei Magazzini Generali di Trieste (11 May 1943). Analisi di una pratica oltre il confine della legislazione”, in *Confini e sconfinamenti*, ed. by I. Candelieri and C. Dafonchio (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2022), pp. 111-125. D. Brasca, “The Goods of Jewish Emigrants in the Trieste Free Port during the Second World War”, in *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century*, ed. by C. Fuhrmeister and B. Murovec (Vienna/Cologne: Böhlau, 2022), pp. 189-234.

²⁷ Royal Decree (RD), No 1415, “Approvazione dei testi della legge di guerra e della legge di neutralità”, 8 July 1938.

enabled their comprehensive seizure, which in Trieste was applied on 11 May 1943 on 637 lift vans, valued at 65 Million lire that were stored in the *Magazzini Generali* and belonged to approximately 479 owners of Jewish origin.²⁸ Despite the fact that the shippers, who handled the seized crates, claimed that they needed to sell them in order to cover their expenses, a second seizure decree of 4 August 1943 ordered that all goods in the free port of Trieste should be handed over to the Italian government.²⁹ However, any plans for future use of the seized goods eventually came to a halt due to the fall of the Fascist regime in July 1943 and the subsequent occupation of the Alpe-Adria region, under which the seized goods were destined for confiscation, alienation and/or translocation by Nazi authorities.

Sales under Duress due to Antisemitic Persecutions

The increasing prohibitions and economic restrictions in many cases forced Jewish citizens to sell their valuables, either to survive or to cover the considerable costs of flight and emigration. To this regard Ilaria Pavan, for instance, poignantly quotes the prominent anti-Fascist Jew from Rome, Emilio Sereni (1907-1977), who already at the beginning of September 1938 told his brother Enzo to ‘sell everything off, whatever the inevitable losses, and *right away*’.³⁰

One of the few cases of early forced sales of Jewish-owned art collections currently known is that of the art historian Giorgio Castelfranco (1896-1978), nowadays more likely known as one of the key figures responsible for the postwar recovery of the Italian artistic heritage looted or removed by Nazi forces across Tuscany. Being of Jewish origin (as his wife, Matilde Forti, 1884-1961), in spring 1938 he was first transferred, ahead of Hitler’s visit, and ultimately dismissed from his job as director of the Pitti Gallery in Florence in February 1939. To survive the economic restrictions and to enable their children’s emigration to the US, the couple was obliged to sell off most of their art collection, among which notable masterworks by Castelfranco’s close friend and prominent exponent of the *scuola metafisica*, Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978). The Milan-based Galleria il Milione and Vittorio Barbaroux

²⁸ Decree of the Prefect of Trieste, No. 1100/12409, 11 May 1943. Shortly afterwards, the Prefect extended the decree to moving goods that were stored in private warehouses in the city and instructed their assessment. This task was rather difficult as it was often not possible to ascertain whether the owners were really Jews and/or had really emigrated to an enemy country. As examined by historian Paolo Felluga, the seizure finally took place, arbitrarily deciding whether they could really be considered enemy citizens within the meaning of the Martial law, see Felluga, “Il sequestro dei beni degli ebrei emigranti nei Magazzini Generali”, pp. 115-118.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁰ E. Sereni/E. Sereni, *Politica e utopia: Lettere 1926-1943* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000), pp. 156-157, letter dated 7 September 1938, quoted from: Pavan, *Beyond the things themselves*, p. 85.

thus organised a sales exhibition, through which works as “Le Muse Inquietanti” and “Autoritratto con Mercurio” were successfully sold.³¹ At the end of 1942 the couple Forti-Castelfranco went into hiding in the countryside, leaving their Florentine home with their friend and alleged secret agent Rodolfo Siviero (1911-1983).³²

Increasingly in similar economic difficulties were also foreign Jews who, after the National Socialists’ rise to power in Germany, had initially found refuge in Italy, but following the promulgation of the racial laws had to face Fascist persecution too.³³ One example is the art dealer and collector Viktor Wallerstein (1878-1944), who found refuge in Florence between 1935 and 1944, where he lived in poverty, selling the few artworks he had managed to take with him during his escape to survive. Among these was a painting by the German expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), which the Brücke Museum in Berlin returned to Wallerstein's heirs in June 2024, acknowledging that the sale to a Florentine art collector in 1940 was to be considered a forced sale because it resulted from financial pressures caused by the Nazi and Fascist persecution.³⁴ This restitution case is particularly significant and unprecedented, as it considers a sale held on Italian territory in 1940 under given circumstances an involuntary transfer of property, as sanctioned by the 1943 Inter-Allied Declaration (see Chapter 2) and the Washington Principles.³⁵

Lastly, the case of well-known archaeologist, collector and art dealer Ludwig Pollak (1868-1943) illustrates paradigmatically the potential extent of sales under duress through the Italian art market, a subject that has not yet been fully addressed.³⁶ Originally from Prague, Pollak settled in Rome in 1895

³¹ The episode and biographical background of Castelfranco is summarised in A. Cecconi, *Resistere per l'Arte. Guerra e patrimonio artistico in Toscana* (Florence: Edizioni Medicea, 2015), pp. 192-194.

³² On Siviero's biography and his activities see F. Bottari, *Rodolfo Siviero. Avventure e recuperi del più grande agente Segreto dell'arte* (Rome: Castelvocchi, 2013). On his role during the postwar period see chapter 2 in this report.

³³ The subject of German Jews finding refuge in Italy, particularly in cities like Florence or Rome – which had historically large German communities – has been dealt with extensively by Berlin historian Klaus Voigt (1938-2021). Like no other scholar to date, Voigt reconstructed the lives of intellectuals, writers and artists who over the course of the 1930s fled the antisemitic and political persecution by the Nazi regime by emigrating to Italy. See K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999).

³⁴ For a more detailed discussion see N. Bauer, “Erich Heckel und Otto Mueller beim Schach. Die Geschichte von Kirchners Gemälde und seinem ehemaligen Eigentümer Victor Wallerstein“, in *Provenienzforschung zur Brücke-Kunst*, ed. by N. Bauer (Berlin: Brücke-Archiv, 25/2024), pp. 38-56.

³⁵ See *Best Practices for the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-confiscated art*, paragraph C, 5 March 2025, URL: <https://www.state.gov/best-practices-for-the-washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art/> (last accessed 30 August 2026).

³⁶ On Pollak's biography and collecting activities see O. Rossini (ed.), *Ludwig Pollak. Archeologo e Mercante d'Arte*, Praga 1868–Auschwitz 1943. Gli Anni d'Oro del Collezionismo Internazionale da Giovanni Barracco a Sigmund Freud, exh. cat. (Roma: Gangemi, 2018); E. Cagiano de Azevedo, “Fra commercio e istituzioni, La vita romana di Ludovico Pollak”, in

and became an eminent figure on the international art market, with strong ties to the United States and Germany. The growing antisemitic climate, which he observed closely from the very beginning, affected him as early as 1934, when despite his many contributions he was expelled from the Bibliotheca Hertziana due to his Jewish origin. Subsequently, Pollak started to transfer some pieces of his art collection (mainly manuscripts and ceremonial objects) to Switzerland, where they remained until their recovery by Pollak's heir after the war. Others he tried to sell on the art market, both nationally and internationally. The first traces of these sales can be found as early as 1935, when he asked for thirteen cultural objects to be exported abroad. Among them was one of his most precious and beloved painting, “The Dream of Joseph”, then attributed to Bernardo Cavallino (1616-1656), which however was banned from export due to its national importance, making it impossible for Pollak to sell abroad.³⁷ Additional attempts of sales occurred between 1942 and the summer of 1943 at three auctions, through which Pollak attempted to sell off a significant number of art objects from his collection, in an effort to survive the period of increasingly tight economic constraints up until the collapse of the Fascist regime and the subsequent occupation of Rome by Nazi forces.³⁸

The illustrated cases point to a by no means insignificant involvement of the Italian art market in sales of Jewish-owned cultural property, in relation to forced sales within Italian territory as well as within the transnational circulation of artworks that were forcibly sold or looted in other European countries. To this regard, one must bear in mind the extensive trade relations between Italian and German art dealers during the years – and in the spirit of – the Rome-Berlin Axis, where renown art dealers such as Eugenio Ventura and Alessandro Contini Bonacossi (see Chapter 5) regularly sold to and bought from Nazi-art agents.³⁹ A notable episode, for instance, involved the exchange of artworks between

Riflessioni sulla tutela. Temi, problemi, esperienze, ed. by. E. Cagiano de Azevedo and R.G. Nucci (Florence: Polistampa, 2010), pp. 41-62; M. Merkel Guldan, *Die Tagebücher von Ludwig Pollak. Kennerschaft und Kunsthandel in Rom. 1893–1934* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1988).

³⁷ See F. De Giambattista, K. Hüls-Valenti and H. Pötzsch: “I’m really proud to have in my room my Guercino and my Cavallino.” Ludwig Pollak and The Dream of Joseph. On the intricate Provenance of a Neapolitan Baroque Painting”, in *Predella. Journal of Visual Arts*, 2 (2024), pp. 89-107.

³⁸ See Rossini, “Ludwig Pollak. La vita e le opere”, pp. 15-35. The auctions in question were the following: Casa di Vendite Palazzo Simonetti, *Catalogo delle vendite all’asta per liquidazione totale negli studi terreni di via Margutta*, Roma, 11-21 maggio 1942; Galleria d’Arte “L’Antonina”, *Catalogo delle vendite all’asta di pregiate raccolte private*, Roma, 22 marzo – 3 aprile 1943; Galleria d’Arte “L’Antonina”, *Vendita di una importante raccolta di arte antica e moderna e di arredamento*, 24 maggio – 2 giugno 1943. From the catalogue annotations Rossini deducts that in the 1942 Simonetti Auction 118 lots belonged to Pollak, but only 23 were sold, significantly below value. At L’Antonina in Spring 1943 were offered the remaining objects, but only 30 of them were sold, and at the third auction a further 57 objects were offered.

³⁹ See among others C. Zaru, “The Affaire Ventura. Antiquarians and Collaborators during and after the Second World War”, in *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 210-224; E. Pellegrini, “Göring in Italy. The Ventura Case”, in *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpine Adriatic Region in the 20th Century*, pp. 145-162; K. Hüls-Valenti, “Überlegungen zur Sonderrolle Italiens im

Eugenio Ventura and German *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring in Spring 1943, where nine French impressionists' paintings, previously seized by the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* from Jewish art collections in Paris, were traded with eight Italian Old Master paintings from Ventura's stock.⁴⁰ A general study on these transnational movements and transactions of unlawfully dispossessed artworks from and to Italy still needs to be realised, although recent contributions on individual cases studies highlight the extent of activities that have not yet been sufficiently examined within the current research framework.⁴¹

1.3 Systematic Confiscations and Looting under the Italian Social Republic and Nazi Occupation, 1943-1945

While Allied forces advanced to liberate Italy from the south towards Rome, on 12 September 1943 Nazi paratroopers orchestrated Mussolini's escape from the Gran Sasso prison. As a result, the central-northern regions of Italy remained under the administrative control of the newly-established Fascist Italian Social Republic for a total of twenty months, during which the regime pursued the anti-Jewish persecution with renewed aggression, in total autonomy and generally in collaboration – but often even in competition – with the occupying Nazi forces.⁴² It should thus be noted that the fate of Jewish citizens as well as that of their properties depended strongly on their geographical location within this scenario.

The enactment of new antisemitic measures, including the confiscation of movable and immovable property, were anticipated by Italian newspapers across the Italian Social Republic already at the beginning of November 1943.⁴³ Their official announcement occurred on 14 November 1943, during the first meeting of the Republican Fascist Party in Verona, by its secretary, Alessandro Pavolini (1903-1945), who declared, among other measures, that the government was preparing to confiscate all Jewish assets in order to 'assist the needs of those affected by bombings'.⁴⁴ On 30 November 1943,

Gefüge des nationalsozialistischen Kunsthandels", in *Provenienz. Forschung International*, ed. by R. Ketterer (Stuttgart: Ernst Rathenau, 2026), p. 125-135.

⁴⁰ For a detailed account see Zaru, "The Affaire Ventura" and Pellegrini, "Göring in Italy".

⁴¹ Results on this topic should however soon emerge thanks to ongoing academic research (see Chapter 5.1).

⁴² For further information see E. Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei. Le leggi razziali in Italia* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 2003).

⁴³ See for instance "Un nuovo progetto di legge sulla questione razziale", *Il Pomeriggio, Corriere della Sera*, no. 262, 5-6 November 1943, p. 1: "Il Ministro dell'Interno ha elaborato un progetto di legge inteso a regolare la questione razziale, appoggiandosi alla legislazione germanica in materia, nota sotto il nome di legge di Norimberga. Sono previste la confisca dei beni mobili e immobili degli ebrei, la limitazione ad ogni libertà professionale, nonché una netta discriminazione razziale".

⁴⁴ Quoted in V. Paolucci, *La Repubblica sociale italiana e il partito Fascista repubblicano, settembre 1943-marzo 1944* (Urbino: Argalia, 1979), p. 157 (cited by Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia Fascista*, 2018, p. 285).

this announcement was followed by the infamous Police Order no. 5, which ordered the arrest of all Jews on Italian territory and the seizure of all their movable and immovable assets.⁴⁵

Only one day later, the first directives and circulars concerning the seizure of Jewish assets were issued. For instance, the director of the Bank of Italy ordered the immediate suspension of all payments, pensions or withdrawals of valuables for all persons belonging to the “Jewish race”. Meanwhile the Minister of National Education, Carlo Alberto Biggini (1902-1945), issued Circular no. 665 on the seizure of artistic heritage. Responsible for the seizure of movable and immovable Jewish property was the aforementioned EGELI, in cooperation with the local Prefectures and the chiefs of the Provinces, who subsequently set up special offices for the assessment of the assets and their seizure – often called “Offices for Jewish Affairs”. This work was greatly facilitated by the fact that, since the August 1938 census, the Fascist state had continued to collect information on every single Jew living in Italy, compiling detailed lists of addresses and properties, which the Badoglio government decided not to destroy after the fall of Mussolini. Consequently, the fascist officials as well as the German occupiers could often rely on these up-to-date lists to easily identify and seize the Jewish assets.

On 4 January 1944, the seizure of all Jewish assets turned into a definitive confiscation, as sanctioned by legislative decree no. 2.⁴⁶ A few weeks later, on 28 January, these provisions were extended to Jewish organisations and associations, leading to the dissolution of all Jewish Communities and the seizure of their assets, in particular their libraries and ceremonial objects.⁴⁷ During the inventory and evaluation process of the households that were to be confiscated, the Prefectures and EGELI in some cases relied on experts such as antique dealers or officials from local museums and superintendencies. This becomes evident for instance in Venice, where the confiscation decrees that included objects such as underwear, hangers, crockery or clothing, were sometimes accompanied by detailed lists and estimates of the valuables. In other regions, though, the identification of the confiscated valuables has proven extremely difficult, precisely because inventories were not drawn by experts and remain often rudimentary. In a circular of 12 February 1944, the Minister of Finance, Giampietro Domenico Pellegrini (1899-1970), specified that the confiscated goods of low value or small quantities could be sold by the EGELI, given that their safekeeping would have entailed higher expenses than their value,

⁴⁵ Ordinanza di polizia RSI N. 5, 30 November 1943.

⁴⁶ RDL, No. 2, “Nuove disposizioni concernenti i beni posseduti dai cittadini di razza ebraica”, 4 January 1944.

⁴⁷ Ordinanza di polizia RSI, No. 459, “Scioglimento Comunità israelitiche”, 28 January 1944; see M. Sarfatti, “Gli Archivi e le Biblioteche delle Comunità ebraiche italiane”, in: *Rassegna mensile di Israel*, vol. LXVI, terza serie (2000), pp. 161-166.

or destroyed.⁴⁸ In the former case, the EGELI was entitled to hand them over to local Fascist welfare agencies, auction houses or antique dealers. The quantitative scale of the goods they auctioned off, and the involvement of local actors still needs further investigating. Quite telling is the case of cities such as Florence, where Florentines knowingly bought movable assets seized from their fellow Jewish citizens for over 2 million lire at two public auctions organised at the end of June-early July 1944.⁴⁹

As studies have shown, in most regions controlled by the RSI confiscations were generally carried out extremely systematically and comprehensively by the Fascist administration, but sometimes also irregularly and illegitimately. This was the case especially in the phase following the police order of 30 November 1943, which was often applied autonomously by both central and local authorities, not complying with the indication of the RSI that Jewish property was to be used for war victims.⁵⁰ Numerous assets thus ended up in the pockets of EGELI officials, heads of provinces, or other private individuals involved in the expropriation processes.⁵¹

The Confiscation of Artworks and the Involvement of the Superintendencies

Special attention should be paid to the artistic heritage belonging to Jewish citizens first seized and then confiscated by the RSI, a process which required the involvement of the regional superintendencies, entrusted by Fascist legislation with the tasks of closely monitoring the expropriation processes and acting as administrators of any asset of notable artistic value that had been confiscated.⁵² In fact, the systematic assessment of Jewish-owned artistic goods by regional superintendencies began with the already mentioned circular no. 665 of 1 December 1943, which ordered the seizure of all works of art belonging to Jews, even if discriminated, or to “Israelite institutions”.⁵³ The term ‘works of art’ related not only to works of figurative art (painting, sculpture, engraving, etc.), but also to works of applied art and all other cultural goods that could not be considered objects of common use. According to Fascist legislation, all Jewish owners of cultural objects had to self-denounce their property to the competent superintendency, indicating the quality

⁴⁸ See Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia Fascista*, 2007, p. 297.

⁴⁹ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things themselves*, p. 167.

⁵⁰ See Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia Fascista*, 2007, p. 299.

⁵¹ See Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei*, p. 158.

⁵² See I. Pavan, “The Italian Experience”, in: *Commission for Art Recovery* (2017), <https://www.obs-traffic.museum/italian-experience> (last accessed 28 May 2025); K. Hüls-Valenti, “Il destino delle opere d’arte di proprietà ebraica sotto la Repubblica Sociale Italiana – il caso di Venezia”, in: *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, Bd. 103 (2023), pp. 345-373.

⁵³ Roma, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (from now on ACS), MPI, General Directorate AA BB, Div. III, 1929-1960, b. 261, *Opere d’arte appartenenti a persone di razza ebraica o a istituzioni israelitiche*, Prot. no. 665, 1 December 1943.

of the works, a description of them, the artist and their current location. Subsequently, the superintendencies – in cooperation with the local authorities – were required to carry out inspections to ascertain the presence of the reported assets and to take necessary measures for their custody and conservation. It should be noted that at this stage these measures still amounted to an act of seizure, but not confiscation, i.e. the effective expropriation and removal of assets. The latter took place only in case the owners had failed to declare their property or if they had provided false or incomplete information.

With the legislative decree of 4 January 1944, seized cultural goods were to be definitively confiscated in favour of the Italian Social Republic. Instead of being handed over to the EGELI, that would have sold them, the Ministry of National Education ensured that the artworks “of national interest” would be assigned to the regional superintendencies for subsequent allocation to local museums. To this effect, Minister Biggini issued a circular on 13 April 1944 stating that ‘in order to prevent works of art of important interest from being dispersed, I dispose that the superintendents of the Galleries be appointed as seizure agents of all notified works of Jewish property’.⁵⁴ As pointed out by Ilaria Pavan, the superintendencies not only kept the confiscated goods, therefore, but also had the right to assign them to their public collections.⁵⁵

Exemplary was the Venice-based art collection of countess Adele Salom di Carrobbio (1850-1944), of which fourteen paintings by Pietro Longhi (1701-1785) and four works by Salvator Rosa (1615-1673) were classified as national heritage. Aware of the notified artworks, the Venetian superintendent Vittorio Moschini (1896-1976) pursued the seizure of the Salom collection immediately after the publication of the 1 December 1943 circular. In January 1944, the collection was confiscated by the Prefecture of Padua, in cooperation with the EGELI, at the family’s summer residence in Padua, where the Saloms had been storing the collection since November 1942, to protect it from war damage. The inventories of the two villas were compiled by the deputy director of the Civic Museum of Padua, Oliviero Ronchi, to which the collection had been destined. Thus, the collection was shipped to the museum's deposits, in Padua, where it would remain in storage until the postwar period.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Roma, ACS, MPI, General Directorate AA BB, Div. III, 1929-1960, b. 261, *Works of art belonging to persons of the Jewish race or to Jewish institutions*, Circular no. 5, 13 April 1944. – Translation of the author.

⁵⁵ See Pavan, “The Italian Experience”, p. 7.

⁵⁶ For more details see Hüls-Valenti, “Il destino delle opere d’arte”.

Events of Looting by Nazi and/or Fascist Forces

In addition to the confiscations carried out by the Fascists across the territory of the RSI, one can also observe other ways in which artistic and cultural property was dispersed, i.e. through theft, looting and illicit appropriations by the Fascists, Nazis or simply also by Italian citizens (see for instance the case of Leo Goldschmied and the so-called banda Carità in Chapter 2). These were facilitated by the fact that from autumn 1943 onwards (if not earlier) many homes had been abandoned by their owners, either because they had fled the country, gone into hiding or had been deported, and were subsequently allocated to displaced persons or occupied by German authorities.⁵⁷

In this regard, a number of significant art collections owned by foreign Jews living in the surroundings of Florence are known to have been pillaged by German troops following and often regardless of the previous seizure of the assets by the Fascists as “enemy property”, under the Martial Law. To name but a few, the family Landau-Finaly, whose villa and art collection had been seized by the Fascist government as early as in autumn 1940 and suffered towards the end of the war numerous losses of cultural goods due to the looting by the Nazis as well as through random pillaging by both German and Allied troops.⁵⁸ Similarly, the property of the American Loeser family in Florence was seized by the Fascists in 1942 after their flight to Switzerland due to the antisemitic persecution. At disposal of the Fascist government, Loeser’s Villa Torri Gattaia was assigned to the German occupying authorities as their headquarters and following the retreat of the German troops much of the Villa’s interior disappeared. Among others, the painting “Santa Caterina d’Alessandria” by Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644) was illicitly taken and resurfaced only in 2009 on the Italian art market, after which it was returned to the Loeser heirs in 2013.⁵⁹

Exemplary for the irregular and currently still unresolved acts of looting is once again the case of the Rome-based archaeologist Ludwig Pollak, who was arrested by the National Socialists and deported to Auschwitz, together with his family, on 16 October 1943, in the so-called *sabato nero* (‘black

⁵⁷ The Anselmi Commission provided a general overview on the lootings city by city together with an annex ordered by surname, that records personal testimonies of the events, see Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, p. 115-142.

⁵⁸ Daria Brasca has investigated the looting of the art collections in Florence in her Ph.D. thesis, concluded in 2016 at the IMT Lucca, see D. Brasca, *The Fate of Jewish-Owned Cultural Property: Florence during WWII*, Ph.D. thesis, IMT School of Advanced Studies Lucca, 2016 (reserved access).

⁵⁹ See T. Scovazzi, “La restituzione dei beni culturali depredati alle vittime dell’olocausto: La situazione in Italia,” in: *Il Diritto Ecclesiastico*, 1-2(2018), pp. 171-181, here p. 174.

Saturday', the raid of Rome's former ghetto and other Jewish homes). After his deportation, Pollak's home in the Palazzo Odescalchi remained abandoned and was partially looted.⁶⁰

The Synagogues, archives and libraries of Italy's diverse Jewish Communities were particularly affected by these violent raids. The looting of the Synagogues in Florence, Alessandria, Ferrara, Milan and Turin, as well as their severe damage caused by vandalism, fires and bombings, that had often already occurred during the Fascist regime, are paradigmatically recalled in this context.⁶¹ A particular reference should be made to the spoliations carried out by the Nazis in the autumn of 1943 in Rome, which affected especially the property of the Jewish Community. After extorting a total of 50 kg of gold (for the pretended salvation of Roman Jews) and an initial raid of the community's offices, where they mainly removed archival material and two million lire, on 13 October 1943, the Nazis looted first the community's world-class library, made up of over 7,000 volumes, including several unique manuscripts, and then also that of the Italian Rabbinical College.⁶² As reconstructed by the Tedeschi Commission, a unit of the infamous *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* had been dispatched to Rome with the aim of looting and translocating all books, incunabula, palimpsests and other ritual objects to German territory, presumably destined for the library of the infamous "Institute for Research on the Jewish Question" (*Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage*) in Frankfurt am Main.⁶³

Such punctual raids by Nazi looting agencies as well as by individual members of the Wehrmacht – that by no means reached comparable proportions as in other European occupied countries – soon dominated the Italian public perception of the German occupants, with long-lasting effects on the postwar narrative, successfully overshadowing the confiscation and looting activities by the Fascists.⁶⁴ For instance, the ambiguous events surrounding the 187 crates of artworks from the Neapolitan Museo di Capodimonte (among others) stored at the monastery of Montecassino, reflect the fine line between looting and art protection measures that were carried out by the German military in Italy: while 172 crates were salvaged from the bombings of the monastery thanks to their transfer to the Vatican state by a Göring armoured division, 15 crates were alienated from the convoy and transported

⁶⁰ See Rossini, "Ludwig Pollak. La vita e le opere", 15-35; De Giambattista, Hüls-Valenti and Pötzsch, "Ludwig Pollak and The Dream of Joseph".

⁶¹ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, pp. 148, 154-156.

⁶² See Commissione per il recupero del patrimonio bibliografico della Comunità ebraica di Roma, razziato nel 1943 (known as Commissione Tedeschi), *Rapporto finale*, Roma 2009.

⁶³ See Ibid., pp. 122-124.

⁶⁴ See B. Gaudenzi, "The 'Return of Beauty'? The Politics of Restitution of Nazi-Looted Art in Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria, 1945-1998", in *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 28, 2 (2021), pp. 323-346.

to the north. Although, as shown by Lutz Klinkhammer and Christian Fuhrmeister the predominating intent in this and later interventions by the German art protection squad (*Deutscher militärischer Kunstschutz*) remained the safeguarding of the artworks, still nowadays the Montecassino episode is often depicted as a comprehensive act of looting by the Germans.⁶⁵

German Operational Zones Prealps and Alpe Adria

The establishment of two German Operational zones, that of the Alpine foothills (OZAV) and that of the Adriatic coast (OZAK), took place immediately after the announcement of Italy's armistice on 8 September 1943, as part of Nazi Germany's occupation of north-eastern Italy. While in the territory under the control of the Italian Social Republic (i.e. the rest of northern and central Italy) German forces officially only held a military presence, they assumed full administrative control of both Operational zones, which included applying their own antisemitic policies, as in other occupied European countries.⁶⁶

In the OZAV, specifically in South Tyrol, the first arrests of Jews, accompanied by the confiscations and looting of their property, were executed by Nazi agencies as early as mid-September 1943. As shown by the Anselmi Commission, already by mid-November the vast majority of houses, offices and shops, as well as bank accounts belonging to Jews had been comprehensively seized by German authorities.⁶⁷ Ilaria Pavan notes in this regard that a list exists of fifty-three people, mainly residing in Meran, whose properties had been seized, but without any details about which assets in particular had been requisitioned.⁶⁸

In the OZAK, which included Trieste as the operative capital of the German forces, a strong conflict soon arose between the German authorities and the Fascist government of the Italian Social Republic over the question of the ownership of Jewish property, particularly after the legislative decree of 4 January 1944, that sanctioned the confiscation of all Jewish property in favour of the RSI. In fact, the application of this decree was quickly suspended in both Operational Zones by the Supreme

⁶⁵ For further details on this episode and on the activities of the German art protection squad more broadly see: L. Klinkhammer, "Die Abteilung 'Kunstschutz' der Deutschen Militärverwaltung in Italien 1943-1945", in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, Bd. 72 (1992), pp. 483-549; C. Fuhrmeister, *Die Abteilung "Kunstschutz" in Italien. Kunstgeschichte, Politik und Propaganda 1936-1963* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2019).

⁶⁶ For an in-depth study see Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia. 1943-1945*; Wedekind, *Nationalsozialistische Besatzungs- und Annexionspolitik in Norditalien 1943 bis 1945*.

⁶⁷ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, pp. 163-200.

⁶⁸ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 171.

Commissioner, Friedrich Rainer (1903-1947), who in turn issued a German decree placing all Jewish movable and immovable property at his disposal.⁶⁹

Taking advantage of the preparatory work carried out by the Fascists in locating and registering Jewish property, the German authorities expropriated in Trieste alone at least 400 properties and 30 businesses,⁷⁰ as well as a significant number of cultural assets owned by prominent Jewish families, such as the art collections of the Morpurgo de Nilma, Mayer, Schott, Pollitzer and Pincherle families.⁷¹ While a small number of Jewish-owned artworks had already been transported to safety deposits in February 1943, as part of general art protection measures by the superintendency of Venezia Giulia and Friuli, the German confiscations were carried out so comprehensively and quickly that in many cases the Italian authorities had no possibility to intervene.⁷² Impossible to prevent by the Italian authorities were also the numerous acts of looting, carried out by members of the SS as well as by the *Luftwaffe*, who often occupied properties which had previously been confiscated, as in the case of Palazzo Morpurgo, in Trieste, or the Villa Varda in the Province of Pordenone, owned by the late Mario Morpurgo de Nilma (1867-1943).⁷³

Cultural assets confiscated from the Jews were initially deposited in the Trieste Synagogue, where those of notable artistic value were selected and evaluated by German art historians. In agreement with the superintendency, the cultural goods of local interest were then assigned to provincial museums, such as the Civic Museum of Trieste or the Civic Museum of Udine. Others, especially those of higher value or art historical relevance, were instead translocated to Carinthia to be assigned to Austrian museums or to be sold through the auction house Dorotheum. For instance, historian Anneliese Schallmeiner has determined that in January 1945 the Commissioner of the Monuments Protection Section (*Abteilung Denkmalschutz*), Walter Frodl (1908-1994), selected 480 objects among

⁶⁹ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, 2001, pp. 112-113.

⁷⁰ Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 173.

⁷¹ D. Brasca, „The Dispossession of Italian Jews: The Fate of Cultural Property in the Alpe Adria Region during Second World War“, in *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 79-106.

⁷² Roma, ACS, MPI, AABBA, Div. III, 1929-1960, b. 261, *Opere d'arte appartenenti a persone di razza ebraica o a istituzioni israelitiche*, Letter Fausto Franco to the Ministry of National Education, 7 May 1944.

⁷³ C. Da Dalt, “The Case of Morpurgo de Nilma's Art Collection in Trieste: From a Jewish Legacy to a 'German Donation'”, in *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 107-122.

the ones stored at the Synagogue of Trieste, and had them sent to the Reichsgau Museum in Klagenfurt, an institution he had been directing since 1942.⁷⁴

A telling example of these confiscation and re-distribution processes is the fate of the art collection of Andrea Pollitzer (1892-1972), an illustrious member of the Jewish Community of Trieste and owner of the *Adria* soap company.⁷⁵ In 1944, all cultural goods owned by him and his wife Anita Morpurgo Pollitzer (1908-1987) were confiscated by German authorities and subsequently divided according to their destination. Two hundred and twenty boxes of furniture, paintings, silverware and porcelain were deposited in the port of Trieste, where they were auctioned off or sold directly to the Supreme Commissioner and to other private buyers. In the meantime, objects of significant artistic interest were transported to Trieste's Synagogue. A group of artworks of Venetian art and local interest was assigned to the Civic Museums of Trieste and Udine, while the others were sent to Klagenfurt, together with a substantial book collection of about 20,000 volumes belonging to Andrea's mother, Elda.

A similar example relates to the seven paintings of the Trieste-based collector Filippo Brunner (1862-1947), confiscated from Brunner's farmhouse, in the Province of Gorizia, in January 1944 by the National Socialists in collaboration with republican Fascists. After they were inventoried by German art historian Erika Hanfstaengl (1912-2003), Frodl assigned four of the canvases to the Civic Museum in Udine, while three others were sent to Carinthia. While the latter disappeared after the war, the first four remained at the Civic Museum in Udine until 2017, when scholar Margherita Colusso rediscovered them and revealed their complex history.⁷⁶ Although the four canvases had a note on their reverse, indicating their provenance as Jewish property, they were not returned after the war, but remained in storage until their restitution to the Brunner heir in 2023.

The same was true for the aforementioned goods deposited in the port of Trieste.⁷⁷ In some instances, German authorities ordered their sale by auction, either directly on site through the *Adria* Freight Transport Company, established in the autumn of 1943 by the Supreme commissioner, or through the Klagenfurt branch of the Dorotheum. In other cases, the objects were removed to the German

⁷⁴ A. Schallmeiner, "Removal Goods Stored in the Free Port of Trieste", in *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century*, pp. 235-267.

⁷⁵ Brasca, "The Dispossession of Italian Jews", pp. 89-93.

⁷⁶ M. Colusso, "New Findings in Storage at the Museum of Udine. The Case of Paintings Seized from the Brunner Collection", in *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alp Adria Region in the 20th Century*, pp. 289-304.

⁷⁷ The reconstruction of the auctions at the Dorotheum in Klagenfurt is rather difficult, as the auction house's historical documentation from the war years is dispersed.

Reich, to be distributed to civilians affected by bombings. It is estimated that until the summer of 1944, 499 lift vans and 989 individual crates had been shipped to Berlin, 170 lift vans and 7,719 individual crates to Carinthia.⁷⁸ In spite of the recent scientific attention, to date most of the Jewish property deposited at the port of Trieste and then confiscated, sold, removed or distributed by German forces between the winter of 1943/44 and the end of the war remains dispersed.

Conclusion

A report sent to Benito Mussolini by the Minister of Finance summarising the first year of application of Decree no. 2 allows us to draw an approximate picture of the scale and extent of expropriations carried out by the Fascist Republic. By the end of 1944, 6,768 confiscation decrees had been issued, of which 2,590 referred to movable and immovable property, 2,996 to deposits at banks, stock or insurance companies and 182 to companies.⁷⁹ This number was destined to increase to at least 7,847 decrees by the end of the war, of which 7,116 were issued in Northern Italy.⁸⁰ In the German Operational Zones, until February 1945 no less than 1,420 confiscation decrees had been issued by the Nazis, and the personal bank account of the German high commissioner, Friedrich Rainer, into which all proceeds of the confiscation and sales processes had been channelled, showed a total balance of 35,478,006.25 lire, with deposits totalling 55,508,640.30 lire.⁸¹

Although the Anselmi Commission collected significant data on the antisemitic persecution and confiscations, due to incomplete documentation to date no comprehensive and detailed list of all confiscated assets exists. Thus, it remains difficult to establish the total value of the confiscated assets, and more specifically to identify the extent of confiscated cultural objects, not to speak of the objects that were subject to looting and plunder, where no records were kept, for obvious reasons. The same difficulty in giving a quantitative assessment applies to the extent of forced sales or sales under duress, which occurred both during the first period of antisemitic persecution (1938-1943) and – under

⁷⁸ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 172-173; G. Anderl/A. Schallmeiner, “Sequestered/Confiscated Assets in Trieste: A List of Austrian Jewish Owners in Viennese Archives. A Workshop Report”, in *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 147-162.

⁷⁹ See Rome, ACS, RSI, SPD, Carteggio Riservato, b. 64, Appunto per il Duce, 12 March 1945.

⁸⁰ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto Generale*, p. 51.

⁸¹ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 175.

dramatic circumstances – from the armistice until the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, as Ilaria Pavan poignantly concludes:

While documents can offer only a patchy and partial image of the overall spoliation of Jewish assets from 1943 to 1945, one can still see the systematic, sweeping methods and aims with which this plan was carried out by the Fascist and Nazi authorities, each in their respective fields and spheres of influences. And so, as in other countries, the pillaging of property that took place in Italy ran parallel to deportation and was its counterpart.⁸²

⁸² Ibid., p. 176.

Chapter 2

The Long and Winding Road to Restitution, 1944-1980s

In postwar Italy, the restitution of cultural property played a paramount role in the cathartic rebuilding of the nation's legitimacy after the harsh divisions of Fascism and civil war, at both the domestic and international levels. Given the centrality attributed to cultural heritage in the country's nation-building narratives both before and after the Second World War, the restitution of artworks displaced or looted during the war took centre stage, and was charged with a particular political significance – especially when it came to state-owned artworks which had been removed during the phase of Nazi occupation (1943-1945). As a result, between 1945 and 1950 many events were organised to celebrate the return of several public collections in all pomp and circumstance – as in the case of the July 1945 ceremony in Florence that marked the return of over 750 artworks that had been displaced or looted from several wartime caches by retreating German troops between 1943 and 1944.⁸³

There were, however, two distinct sides to this story: one characterised by a triumphal narrative of national reconstruction and of the overcoming of the country's Fascist past; the other marked by silence, omissions, or even lingering antisemitism, often perpetrated during that same process of making amends for the persecution and expropriation inflicted upon Jewish citizens during the Fascist era. As a result, an important difference emerged already by the early 1950s. While the restitution of state-owned collections took place almost in its entirety in the immediate aftermath of the war – and was staged as a cathartic rite of passage through which Italy aimed at being reborn as a respectable member of the so-called Western sphere in the incipient Cold War – the restitution of Jewish-owned cultural property often resulted into a prolonged affair, marred by oblivion or even outright discrimination.⁸⁴

In the case of Italy, the substantial percentage of state-owned artworks included among those retrieved in the territories of the former Greater German Reich (including the two Operational zones located in northeastern Italy), combined with the limits of state-to-state “external restitution” measures

⁸³ See Cecconi, *Resistere per l'arte*.

⁸⁴ See in particular F. Levi, “La restituzione dei beni”, in *Il ritorno alla vita: vicende e diritti degli ebrei in Italia dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale*, ed. by M. Sarfatti (Florence: Giuntina, 1998), pp.77-94; F. Cavarocchi, “Ricerche e restituzioni delle opere d'arte sottratte dai nazisti: il caso italiano (1945-1950)”, in: *Contemporanea* 21, no. 4 (2018), pp. 559-586; B. Gaudenzi, “The ‘Return of Beauty’?”, pp. 323-346.

implemented by the Western Allies,⁸⁵ was to have significant bearing on the effectiveness of the whole process. In fact, as a former member of the Axis, Italy was not *per se* entitled to restitution. It was only after intense negotiations, which included an attempt to compel Italy to return looted cultural property to its former colonies (as sanctioned by the 1947 Peace treaty), that Cold War as well as domestic considerations convinced the Western Allies to include Italy among the beneficiaries of the restitution process.⁸⁶ Not dissimilarly to other Western European countries – like France, the Netherlands and later Austria – Italy was therefore entrusted with the task of implementing “internal restitution”, that is the returning of retrieved objects to individual Jewish citizens, a process that would in some cases result in the failure to restore objects to their rightful owners (or their heirs) or even in the withholding of cultural property by the state. The result was a prolonged and extremely strenuous quest for restitution which – despite the actually significant volume of property returned in the 1940s and 1950s – engendered a sense of discrimination or even of ‘second expropriation’, as Austrian art historian Sophie Lillie has argued,⁸⁷ which was inflicted upon the rightful owners through a number of bureaucratic hurdles, including having to pay storage taxes for properties confiscated from them by the Fascist state.

Equally importantly, being able to pose almost exclusively as beneficiary of the restitution process vis-à-vis Germany was to play a crucial role in consolidating the “victim myth” – that is the myth of the ‘good Italian’ as a mere victim of the ‘evil German’,⁸⁸ rather than its long-standing ally, not to mention one of the very few countries to implement persecutory measures in peace time, of its own accord. This would lead to a lopsided restitution process, during which an initial phase of relative commitment to restoring the violated property – and more generally civil – rights of Jewish citizens (1944-1947) would quickly turn into a generalised whitewashing of Fascist antisemitic crimes that would survive up to the late 1980s, and to some extent up to the present day.

⁸⁵ The consequences of these limitations have already been analysed in depth in the case of countries like France or the Netherlands, see M. R. Marrus, *Some Measure of Justice: The Holocaust Era Restitution Campaign of the 1990s* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), B. Gaudenzi, “Crimes against Culture. From Plunder to Postwar Restitution Politics”, in *A Companion to the Holocaust*, ed. by S. Gigliotti and H. Earl (London: Wiley, 2020), pp. 191-208.

⁸⁶ The restitution of cultural property looted from countries subjected to Italy’s colonial rule underwent an even more extreme process of whitewashing and opposition, see F. Cavarocchi, “Lost in Transition. Post-war Italy Facing Claims to Cultural Objects by Its Former Colonies”, in *The Politics of Cultural Restitution in Global Perspective*, ed. by B. Gaudenzi and A. Cazzola (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, forthcoming 2027).

⁸⁷ S. Lillie, “Restitution in Österreich als zweite Enteignung,” in *Raub und Restitution: Kulturgut aus jüdischem Besitz von 1933 bis heute*, ed. by I. Bertz and M. Dormann (Berlin: Jüdisches Museum, 2008), pp. 245-251.

⁸⁸ See F. Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2013).

2.1 Becoming Citizens Again

At the end of the Second World War, Italian Jews found themselves in extremely harsh conditions. Between 1938 and 1945, Italy's Jewish population had lost over 40% of its members, declining from approximately 48,000 to fewer than 30,000 people. Approximately 8,529 individuals (both Italian and foreign nationals) arrested "for racial reasons" were murdered in the Shoah, with only 837 people in total surviving deportation. Furthermore, over 4,000 Italian Jews (as well as ca. 11,000 foreigners) had decided to leave Italy permanently since 1938, and an additional 4,500-5,000 had formally renounced their faith and only partially retracted their conversion in the postwar years.⁸⁹ This was particularly evident in areas which had been subjected to direct Nazi occupation, as in the case of Meran, in South Tyrol, or Trieste, whose thriving community of over 6,000 Jews had shrunk to 1,600 people by 1945.

Jewish communities across northern and central Italy in particular – where most Jews resided before 1938 – were faced with the daunting task of assisting members looking for their loved ones while simultaneously caring for thousands of refugees and survivors, who were often in a state of abject poverty. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Italian Jews who had managed to survive found themselves in dire economic need. As Thessaloniki-born 28-year-old Alberto Saltiel summarised in a memoir to the Jewish Community of Florence in late August 1944, two weeks after the liberation of the city: 'One can safely say that my family's ruin is now complete (reserves exhausted, objects sold to meet the most basic life needs; expenses incurred during the period of hiding, including having to survive without ration cards for ten months [...]). Besides being deprived of my parents' affection, today I find myself without any money, or even underwear to change into.'⁹⁰

More generally, the end of the war and of hiding did not always correspond to the ceasing of struggles or even of discriminations. Whenever homes had not been destroyed by bombing raids, survivors almost invariably found them occupied by evacuees. In Florence, for instance – where the Tuscan Committee of National Liberation (CTLN) proved rather responsive in reverting and documenting anti-Jewish persecution, thanks also to its strong links to the local community – the new anti-Fascist administration issued ordinances to allow Jews to return home immediately after the liberation of the city, "obliging" the new occupants to welcome them while remaining in cohabitation, for the time

⁸⁹ Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, pp. 181-182. More generally see G. Schwarz, *After Mussolini: Jewish Life and Jewish Memories in Post-Fascist Italy* (Edgware, Middlesex: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012).

⁹⁰ Firenze, Archivio Storico Comunità Ebraica di Firenze (from now on ASCEF), b. 142, *Pratiche e requisizioni di beni ebraici*, f. 108, Saltiel Alberto, Memoriale, 25 August 1944.

being. While in some cases this happened smoothly, in many others it proved difficult, to say the least. In August 1945, for instance, the governmental commissioner of the Union of Italian Israelite Communities (UCII, renamed UCEI, Union of Italian Jewish Communities, in 1987), Giuseppe Nathan, wrote to Prime Minister Ferruccio Parri complaining that ‘in several cities, municipal and prefectural authorities exercise an action that is, if not obstructionist, certainly not helpful for Jews, who have been victims of thefts and spoliations by Fascists.’⁹¹ Others managed to finally make it home to find it bereft of their loved ones – not to mention all their belongings – and decided to move on to a different city (or in a few instances to Palestine), not wanting to have anything to do with those same authorities and fellow citizens that had in some instances actively participated in the persecution and murder of their families.⁹² Florence is once again a good case in point. As reconstructed by Gloria Pescarolo in her database project, of the 2,300 Jews living in Florence according to the 1938 census, approximately 1,600 returned to the city at the end of the war. Of these, only about 34% filed restitution claims to regain possession of their homes, businesses, furnishings and personal items.⁹³

2.2 Postwar Restitution Legislation, 1944-1960

At the international level, the principle of returning property seized from Jews and victims of National Socialism was established in January 1943, when seventeen Allied governments and the French National Committee issued the Inter-Allied Declaration against Acts of Dispossession committed in Territories under Enemy Occupation or Control.⁹⁴ While the agreement considered null even formally legal sales that had occurred through apparent consent of the parties involved, thereby introducing a significant legal innovation, it did not permit intervention by one state in the internal affairs of another to promote or directly remedy the restoration of legality violated by persecutions and indiscriminate spoliations.

In the Italian case, the governments formed after Mussolini’s arrest on 25 July 1943 – led first by Pietro Badoglio, a General colluded with Fascism, and after the liberation of Rome in June 1944 by Ivanoe Bonomi, President of the anti-fascist coalition (Committee of National Liberation, CLN) –

⁹¹ Document included in G. Lévy, “Looting Jewish Heritage in the Alpe Adria Region. Findings from the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) Historical Archives”, in: *Studi di Memofonte* 22 (2019), pp. 28-39, here p. 37.

⁹² See for instance N. Fiano, *A5405. Il coraggio di vivere* (Saronno: Monti, 2003) and M. Pezzetti, *Il libro della Shoah italiana. I racconti di chi è sopravvissuto* (Turin: Einaudi new ed. 2015), pp. 372-373.

⁹³ See G. Pescarolo, *Ritornare cittadini*, database project on Florentine Jewish restitution claims (no public access at present).

⁹⁴ The original Declaration is available at: <https://www.lootedartcommission.com/inter-allied-declaration> (last accessed 14 August 2026).

reinstated civil and property rights stripped by the Racial Laws and sanctioned the immediate restitution of Jewish property through a series of decrees. These included first and foremost Royal Decree no. 26 of 20 January 1944, entitled Dispositions for the Reintegration of Property Rights of Italian and Foreign Citizens Previously Declared or Considered of “Jewish Race”, which came into effect on 5 October 1944 (with DLL no. 252); Legislative Decree no. 393 of 5 May 1946, which focused on the Claiming of Property Confiscated, Seized or Otherwise Taken from People Persecuted for Racial Reasons under the Dominion of the So-Called Government of the Italian Social Republic; and finally Legislative Decree no. 364 of 11 May 1947, entitled Inheritance of People Deceased Through Acts of Racial Persecution after 8 September 1943 Without Any Heirs, which allocated any so-called heirless property to the UCII.⁹⁵

While these laws came about as a result of both Allied pressure and genuine efforts by the anti-Fascist leadership to dismantle the regime’s persecutory machine, they included a series of flaws and compromises that would in some cases significantly hamper restitution. The most significant related to third-party acquisitions. Unlike in occupied Germany, where Allied legislation sanctioned the restitution of all confiscated or looted property, including that in the hands of third-party buyers,⁹⁶ Italian legislation considered third-party acquisitions “in good faith” unless explicitly stolen. This disposition diverged significantly from analogous French legislation and placed on Jews themselves the burden of demonstrating the bad faith of purchasers. Jewish citizens were thereby forced to file lengthy and costly lawsuits, which in forty-eight percent of cases ended in their defeat.⁹⁷

The Union of Italian Israelite Communities had in fact repeatedly petitioned for the annulment of all property transfers involving Jewish assets after autumn 1938, arguing that bad faith was evident in every case, but Christian Democratic (DC) Justice Minister Umberto Tupini rejected these proposals, arguing that accepting them would upset ‘a traditional principle central to all modern systems of law’.⁹⁸ The urge to pacify a country harshly divided by Fascism, civil war and ongoing political and class struggles – one of the main reasonings behind the 1946 general amnesty supported by then Justice

⁹⁵ For insights into how these pieces of legislation were conceived and the procedures behind their promulgation see Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, esp. pp. 184–190 and more generally M. Toscano, *L’abrogazione delle leggi razziali in Italia (1943–1987)* (Rome: Senato della Repubblica, 1988).

⁹⁶ See J. Lillteicher, “West Germany and the Restitution of Jewish Property in Europe,” in *Robbery and Restitution. The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, ed. by M. Dean, C. Goschler, and P. Ther (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 102.

⁹⁷ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 237.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Pavan, *Le conseguenze economiche*, p. 190.

Minister and Secretary of the Communist Party (PCI) Palmiro Togliatti – and Cold War necessities surely weighed massively on this decision, but they were only part of the equation.

More generally, while the 1944 and 1946 laws sanctioned the immediate restitution of all property confiscated or seized by EGELI or other local Fascist agencies, leading to a significant percentage of property eventually being returned, a series of hurdles consequently stood in the way. Jewish citizens were expected to apply for restitution themselves, and were faced with absurd bureaucratic requests, which often resulted in rather Kafkaesque formulations. To add insult to injury, in several cases claimants found themselves having to deal with the same functionaries who had been in charge of plundering their homes only a few months prior,⁹⁹ and who were often far from willing to remedy the discriminations that they had inflicted upon them with such alacrity.

Not dissimilarly to general postwar legal proceedings on Fascist and Nazi crimes, results varied greatly from city to city and were often overturned as a result of the amnesty or even more systematically after the end of the anti-Fascist coalition in 1947, when the Socialist and Communist parties were expelled from government to pave the way for Italy's participation in the Marshall Plan and more generally in the Cold War. It should be noted that while the Togliatti amnesty had explicitly refrained from condoning theft or any removal of property 'for economic benefits, especially after 1947 these acts of dispossession would still often be excused as mere collaboration with the Nazi occupiers, rather than independent actions on the part of Fascist authorities, squads or even common citizens. While the domestic and international scenarios played a crucial role, other factors contributed to this state of affairs, starting with a general underestimation of the issue – even by prominent anti-Fascist leaders, who had thoroughly opposed antisemitic legislation – as well as a certain degree of unwillingness on behalf of Jewish communities themselves to press the matter further, out of concern that this might trigger recently suppressed anti-Jewish sentiments.

During these years, the Italian government also passed two laws designed to ensure the return of translocated cultural property back to Italy: first, legislative decree no. 896 of 24 April 1948, pertaining more generally to assets 'removed by the Germans', which made no mention of Jewish assets – although it did not exclude them, as we shall see. This decree was conceived to enable the restitution of artworks looted or removed by the National Socialists from state collections. Second, law no. 77 of

⁹⁹ See for instance the case of Venice in S. Levis Sullam, *I carnefici italiani: Scene dal genocidio degli ebrei, 1943-1945* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2019), pp. 118-119.

14 January 1950, which sanctioned that all cultural objects that had been transferred to Germany voluntarily during the years between 1938 and 1945 – that is, sold by Fascist art dealers or given as gifts by the regime’s dignitaries to their Nazi counterparts – would become property of the Italian state. These comprised artworks which had been seized from complicit art dealers and antiquarians such as Alessandro Contini Bonaccossi or Eugenio Ventura and may have included Nazi or Fascist-looted art, as in the case of the Della Robbia statue “Saint Mary Magdalene” (See Chapter 5).¹⁰⁰

The Western Allies’ political decision to return this latter type of artworks, enacted through the so-called Exceptional Return Order,¹⁰¹ was extremely controversial and caused the head of the Munich Central Collecting Point, MFA&A officer Herbert Leonard, to resign. Quite tellingly, the decision to grant Italy’s requests to return even artworks which had evidently not been looted came at a crucial time – just before the general elections of April 1948, which saw the triumph of the Christian Democratic party. The phrasing and timeframe of this law was extremely telling. By shifting all blame onto Nazi Germany as early as 1938, the administration could minimise Fascist agency and reinforce what would become the all too familiar tale of Italy’s extraneousness to the Racial Laws and the Holocaust, thereby marring its process of ‘coming to terms with the past’ for many years to come.

However, the possibly most controversial decision came in 1960, when the Legal Council of State sanctioned that all property that had remained unclaimed – including heirless assets that had not been allocated to the UCII, as sanctioned by the 1947 Law – would become property of the Italian state. Viable assets, such as government bonds, stocks, and valuables, but also everyday objects, were absorbed by the state. The residual portion of these properties, comprising stocks, bonds, bank drafts and objects ‘no longer of any value’, was destroyed in April 1970.¹⁰²

2.3 The Restitution of Fascist-looted or Confiscated Cultural Property

According to the Anselmi Commission, after the end of the war a substantial part but not all Jewish-owned real estate and businesses were returned – usually those that the EGELI had not had time to sell, often now emptied of any goods, furniture, or personal belongings, or heavily damaged by bombing. Confiscations, however, were only one side of the equation, as countless assets had been

¹⁰⁰ On Ventura see Zaru, “The Affaire Ventura”.

¹⁰¹ See F. Cocco, “Rodolfo Siviero between Fascism and the Cold War: Negotiating Art Restitution and ‘Exceptional Returns’ to Italy after Second World War”, in: *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 198-209.

¹⁰² See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 202.

looted in improvised raids, sold under duress, or destroyed. Quantifying the volume of property stolen and eventually returned has therefore proven an incredibly difficult task. An official balance summary drafted by the EGELI in June 1945 quantified the grand total of all movable and immovable assets appropriated by the agency between 1939 and 1945 as approximately 726 million liras (in 1938 currency). Of these, homes and businesses came to only 46 million, while the remaining 680 million liras in gold, cash, jewellery, furniture and goods were only partly returned – those which had escaped forced sales, looting raids, mandated destruction, war damage, or which would not sit in a ministerial storage room for decades.

The Restitution of Communal Cultural Property

The first restitution phase (1944-1947) was marked by significant efforts on behalf of the UCII, local Jewish communities and several local anti-Fascist administrations, which in a few instances resulted in the relatively quick return of all the property that had survived the war and looting raids. This was true especially of Jewish communal property, as opposed to individual assets. However, results varied significantly not only from city to city but also depending on the type of material and the circumstances of their looting or confiscation. Most Italian communal archives and libraries – with important exceptions, first and foremost the Roman Community's library – survived the war, either in hiding places arranged by community officials or in the confiscation depots set up by the Italian Social Republic. These included the archives of the UCII itself and of Casale Monferrato, Modena, Venice, Trieste and Livorno, as well as the libraries of Livorno, Mantua, Pisa and Pitigliano.

Recovery of what had actually been carried off proceeded through the Ufficio Recuperi (Retrieval Office) and the Italian restitution mission in Germany and Austria, and was hampered by issues of documentation and identification. While both the Ufficio Recuperi and the Mission were headed by the aforementioned Rodolfo Siviero – a central albeit controversial figure in Italy's postwar restitution scene, who went from alleged Fascist spy to plenipotentiary minister for art restitution¹⁰³ – many art historians as well as former and current superintendents, museum directors and curators in fact contributed to the restitution effort, including the aforementioned Giorgio Castelfranco, former

¹⁰³ On Siviero see esp. Bottari, *Rodolfo Siviero*.

director of the Pitti Gallery in Florence, who had been first transferred and then dismissed as a result of the Racial Laws.¹⁰⁴

The situation instead varied considerably when it came to the communities' sacred furnishings. Objects evacuated by the communities themselves generally came back: the three crates of Pisan ceremonial objects taken in 1944 to a private house at Lucca and thence to an enclosed convent were restored to Pisa's synagogue at the end of the war, while Torah scrolls, textiles, paintings and books removed to Sassetta and seized there by the Fascist authorities were brought back to Livorno by US soldiers of the Fifth Army.

The restitution of the contents of the Florence synagogue instead was much more tortuous: in February 1944 the Office for Jewish Affairs, led by rabid antisemite Giovanni Martelloni – responsible for the systematic plundering, persecution and deportation of hundreds of Florentine Jews, together with the infamous Special Services Unit of the Republican Fascist Army, led by Mario Carità – managed to locate and seize the temple's furnishings, which had been hidden before the armistice of 8 September 1943 at two different locations in the Tuscan countryside: at the villa of Augusto Chimichi near Fiesole, and at Villa del Palco in Prato, owned by the industrialist Giorgio Forti.¹⁰⁵ The hiding places were betrayed not through investigation but through bureaucratic compliance: in early February, the Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà insurance agency had disclosed the locations to Martelloni's Office when reporting its business relationship with the Jewish Community, as required by provincial authorities. The local press celebrated the find of the so-called "treasure" of the synagogue, perpetuating antisemitic tropes about alleged Jewish wealth, when in reality it contained Torah scrolls on parchment (some very ancient), silver ornaments, liturgical objects and garments – not the precious gems and gold valued at 'tens of millions' that Fascist propaganda had suggested.¹⁰⁶

In this case, unlike Venice's, the Superintendency's attempts to protect the synagogue's furnishings revealed some institutional tensions within the apparatus of the Italian Social Republic. Superintendent Giovanni Poggi and his assistant Cesare Fasola learned of the seizure only through the press, despite regulations requiring their involvement. Their attempts to inspect and take custody were met with bureaucratic obstruction. Only in May 1944 were the crates finally transferred to the custody of the

¹⁰⁴ See *Giorgio Castellfranco. Un monument man poco conosciuto*, ed. by A. Cecconi, F.Cavarocchi and A.Castellani, exhibition catalogue (Pisa: Regione Toscana, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ See A. Cecconi, "La diaspora del "Tesoro": Gli arredi sacri della Sinagoga di Firenze," in *Resistere per l'arte*, pp. 137-139.

¹⁰⁶ See Cecconi, "La diaspora del "Tesoro", pp. 138-139.

Superintendency. This protection proved temporary: on 28 June 1944, Major Carità demanded to take custody of all Jewish property, and between 28 June and 7 July his squad seized all of the synagogue furnishings as well as private silverware and artworks belonging to several Jewish families, which had been stored at the Galleria dell'Accademia for a total of thirty-one crates.¹⁰⁷

As Allied forces approached Florence, Carità fled to northern Italy, still under Fascist and Nazi control. The crates were finally recovered at the end of April 1945, when partisans of the “Giovane Italia” brigade attacked Villa Ca’ Bianca, a facility used by the Carità gang. The recovered materials were initially entrusted to the local parish priest, then transferred to the 88th US Infantry Division, and finally stored at the Episcopal Seminary in Vicenza.¹⁰⁸ However, it still took another five years before the furnishings could be released back to the Community, as they were first the object of a judicial seizure connected to the prosecution of Martelloni and the so-called banda Carità, and then of a further conservative seizure sought by the partisans who had retrieved the crates and who now claimed a finder's reward – later waived since, as the Community was forced to underline, the objects had been looted, not lost. The sacred objects were finally returned in the summer of 1949, with a final indignity: the Community was required to pay 419,400 lire in accumulated custody fees.¹⁰⁹

A separate group of objects belonging to private Jewish citizens, which had been removed from Florence's branch of the Banca d'Italia and transported to Milan, was instead recovered by the community and redistributed to its owners over the course of 1945.¹¹⁰ Part of the furnishings of the Reggio Emilia temple and of the objects taken from Correggio and Scandiano were retrieved, whereas the recoveries at Turin, Alessandria and Nizza Monferrato were negligible, and the Ferrara community regained little beyond its library. Elsewhere returns were also often fragmentary, especially when objects had been looted by Nazi troops or agencies, as we shall see.

It was, however, the question of compensation that proved to be the least satisfactory strand of the postwar settlement. In 1946 the Casale Monferrato community, which had compiled both an inventory of what survived in its archive and a list of the pieces that had disappeared, submitted a claim to the Italian government but received a negative answer only on 7 June 1966, twenty years later.

¹⁰⁷ See Cecconi, “La diaspora del “Tesoro”, pp. 139-142, as well as the complete transcription of Fasola's report in the appendix, pp. 148-152. On Giorgio Forti's collection see Brasca, *The Fate of Jewish-owned Cultural Property*, esp. pp. 145-151.

¹⁰⁸ See Cecconi, “La diaspora del “Tesoro”, pp. 143-145.

¹⁰⁹ Michele Di Sabato reports an even higher figure of 641,920 lire plus additional charges, see M. Di Sabato, *Le persecuzioni degli antifascisti e degli ebrei pratesi* (Prato: Pentalinea, 2003), p. 523.

¹¹⁰ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, pp. 159-160.

According to the 1976 Report drafted by Luisella Mortara Ottolenghi on behalf of the UCII for Siviero's office, who probably lost it, the sole redress in that case came from the Piedmontese fine arts superintendency, which paid a symbolic five million lire for the furnishings removed. Livorno's experience was comparable in its dilatoriness if not in its outcome: in December 1946 the Community lodged a claim accompanied by a schedule of losses valued at 33,540,000 lire, which the Finance office settled almost fourteen years later for 9,966,440 lire – less than a third of the sum claimed and worth even less in real terms as a result of inflation.¹¹¹

The Restitution of Private Cultural Property

Restitution proved generally rather arduous when it came to privately-owned cultural property. While Fascist-looted artworks as well as cultural assets sold under duress appeared on the whole extremely difficult to recover, several difficulties were encountered even in rather simple instances of property which had been confiscated, properly catalogued and stored by Fascist authorities and was now set to be returned, as sanctioned by postwar legislation. A good case in point is that of the Salom collection. While Countess Adele Salom had been killed in February 1944 during a Fascist raid on her villa, the family's entire collection survived the war and was returned in the immediate postwar period.¹¹² Even in such straightforward cases, however, the circumstances proved bitterly ironic: the family's assigned lawyer, as former EGELI director, had previously been responsible for their dispossession, while the official in charge of the postwar Retrieval Office had served as a functionary of the Questura's Race Office during the Italian Social Republic, and in this capacity had ordered the very raid during which Adele Salom had been murdered. The aforementioned Pietro Longhi paintings were eventually sold to the Banca Cattolica del Veneto (now part of Intesa Sanpaolo) and are today on display at Palazzo Leoni Montanari in Vicenza – with no indication of their provenance or history.¹¹³

The Salom case is emblematic of both the near-total absence of accountability that would characterise Italy's approach to confronting its antisemitic past as well as the relatively swift return of confiscated cultural property in Venice, compared to other Italian cities. This was made possible, paradoxically, by the same bureaucratic apparatus that had implemented the confiscations retaining the documentation to reverse them. While this was possibly the reasoning that led the new Republican institutions to entrust former Fascist expropriation agencies with the restoration of the property it had

¹¹¹ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 161.

¹¹² See Hüls-Valenti, "Il destino delle opere d'arte", p. 359.

¹¹³ See Chapter 1 of this report and Hüls-Valenti, "Il destino delle opere d'arte", p. 356.

so efficiently confiscated during the Fascist dictatorship and the Italian Social Republic, most cases did not go as smoothly.

One of the main obstacles proved to be the EGELI itself, as exemplified by one of the very few cases in which the question of Jewish private cultural property was covered by the press, that of Milan resident Leo Goldschmied. Forced to flee to Switzerland ‘for racial reasons’, upon his return to Milan Mr Goldschmied discovered that his beloved collection of antique books and pre-Columbian statuettes had vanished into thin air. According to his own enquiries, some of the books had quickly resurfaced in the catalogue of an antiquarian bookshop less than a mile away from his home, including a very rare copy of the so-called *Black Bible*. One of the manuscripts had already been sold to an unidentified British collector and was never retrieved.¹¹⁴ The complicated investigation that ensued eventually led the police to Goldschmied’s porter, who after recanting his story several times finally claimed to have received the books from a certain ‘Luigi’, identified only as ‘a member of the SS’ – a typical name for a German Waffen-SS, indeed. That of placing the blame onto imaginary Germans was in fact common practice at the time. In the case of Florence, too, looting squads employed by the Office for Jewish Affairs routinely advised porters of raided buildings to point the finger toward unidentified Germans, should anyone make inquiries about the pillaged homes.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, the entire contents of Goldschmied’s home in Varese, including two antique Chinese vases and a box of antique books, had been seized by the EGELI in December 1944 and deposited in the storage rooms of the Bank CARIPLO. Even in this relatively straightforward case – since the contents of his home had been properly catalogued and remained in storage for the entire time – it took Goldschmied more than eighteen months to get his property back, as testified by the over 146 pages included in his dossier at the historical archive of the Intesa San Paolo bank. During this time, EGELI functionaries exasperated Goldschmied with their absurd requests for taxes and paperwork to the point that in October 1945 he wrote back by recorded delivery: ‘I do not recognise any of the authorities mentioned in your letters; I only recognise the specific event of a plunder and theft executed by bandits at my expense’.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ See for instance “Un pacco di libri preziosi per qualche pacchetto di sigarette”, in *Corriere dell’Informazione*, 20-21 May 1946, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 168.

¹¹⁶ Milano, Archivio Storico Intesa San Paolo, CARIPLO, Fondo EGELI, b. Goldschmitk (sic), raccomandata da Comm. Leo Golschmied, Milan, to Cassa di Risparmio delle Province Lombarde, 30 October 1945.

If Goldschmied's experience well exemplifies the vexations endured by many rightful owners at the hands of the EGELI and other state agencies, the looting of his Milan home testifies to the local – even personal – and often improvised character of many of the plundering actions carried out during the Italian Social Republic. More importantly, it shows how plundering was usually presented as a German enterprise, even when it blatantly was not, thereby highlighting once more the peculiar course taken by postwar Italy in elaborating its anti-Jewish persecutions – that is, by minimising or transferring all blame onto their former Axis allies.

A similarly lopsided narrative developed in other cases, including the fate of what remained of Ludwig Pollak's collection.¹¹⁷ After the entire family had been deported, the Pollaks' home at Palazzo Odescalchi remained abandoned and was partially looted by unknown plunderers (at least partly local, as most of the pieces never resurfaced on the German or international art market and are still missing to this day). When the only surviving family member – Pollak's sister-in-law, Margarete Süssmann Nicod, a Swiss citizen – eventually managed to return to Rome after the end of the war, she discovered that many of the objects had disappeared and marked them as missing on some photos of the apartment's interiors (indicated with the word 'Wo?', that is 'where' on the back). These included the entirety of Pollak's Judaica collection and his collections of prints. Other works had instead been dispersed through forced auction sales, as mentioned in Chapter 1, or were even lost to the vast network of acquaintances that Pollak had entrusted with his pieces.¹¹⁸ What remained of the collection as well as his library and archive were bequeathed by Süssmann Nicod to the City of Rome in 1951, as indicated in Pollak's last will and testament.¹¹⁹

This was true also of property that had been seized, not confiscated, from foreign and Italian Jews either as 'enemy property', after Italy's 1940 war declaration, or as the result of the constant struggle of competencies between different Fascist agencies – as in the case of Martelloni's Office for Jewish Affairs, who resorted to seizing Jewish property before the EGELI could carry out any systematic confiscations. Seized property proved much easier to return, since no actual change of ownership had taken place, but subsequent looting raids by both Fascist and Nazi squads often complicated things considerably, as in the case of the Loeser, Sforzi or Landau-Finaly collections.¹²⁰ The situation was

¹¹⁷ See chapter 1 of this report.

¹¹⁸ See Ludwig Pollak. *Archeologo e mercante d'arte* (Praga 1868 – Auschwitz 1943).

¹¹⁹ Now held at the Museo Barracco, see Chapter 4.

¹²⁰ On the Loeser collection see Chapter 1, for the Sforzi and Landau-Finaly see D. Brasca, *The fate of Jewish-owned cultural property*, pp. 124-135 and 254-272.

further complicated by the fact that the inventories of confiscated/seized items and those of restituted items often did not coincide – not to mention the underlying issue of the accuracy of the inventories of confiscated/seized items themselves. Among the cultural property seized on "racial" grounds from around fifteen prominent Jewish collectors, a substantial number of works were never recovered. The collection of Giorgio Forti — seventeen paintings, including a Signorini, a Fattori and three works by Lega, together with ten carpets of exceptional quality — disappeared entirely, as did the art objects removed from Edwin Lumbroso's villa at San Remo.¹²¹

More generally, most cultural assets looted by Fascist squads or common Italians were never recovered, including those sold at wartime public auctions, like the ones held in Florence in the summer of 1944. As a family from Ferrara tellingly recounted:

Of all our possessions, we only found a 17th-century desk and a kitchen sideboard. We never found the silverware, the priceless 18th-century porcelain dinner service decorated in pure gold, the household furnishings, the beautiful authentic antique furniture, a still life by Giorgio Morandi, a "Magdalene" from the School of Guido Reni, or any of the other things one might find in a large house again. Since my mother discovered one of our vases at an antique dealer in Ferrara immediately after the war, we have always thought that our belongings were bought by the people of Ferrara and are still in their homes.¹²²

In very few instances, Jews were able to prevent the dispersal of their home furnishings thanks to non-Jewish relatives or friends, who could buy their belongings at the auctions.¹²³ In some cases, as we shall see, private citizens would instead even be compelled to buy their property again at postwar auctions, as in the case of Alessandro Basevi's silverware. An even worse fate awaited those artworks which had been auctioned or sold under duress, especially in the earlier phases of Fascist persecution – as in the case of the Saulmann collection, the Italian portion of which was dispersed through impromptu sales in order to enable them to survive in exile in France.¹²⁴

¹²¹ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 162.

¹²² Quoted in Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 162.

¹²³ See F. Cassuto, *Via delle Seggiole*. Franca Cassuto. *Storie di un'ebrea fiorentina (1930-1944)* (Florence: Aska, 2014), pp. 99-100.

¹²⁴ Firenze, Archivio Storico dell'Accademia della Crusca, Fondo Pasquali, letters from Agathe and Ernst Saulmann to Giorgio Pasquali, 6 and 12 December 1942.

2.4 The Restitution of Nazi-looted or Confiscated Cultural Property

As described in Chapter 1, while the majority of Jewish-owned property, including cultural property, was confiscated, seized or looted by Fascist authorities, squads or common citizens, a significant number of prominent artworks and other cultural assets were confiscated or looted by Nazi authorities and agencies, first and foremost in the two Operational Zones but also in the territory of the Italian Social Republic. When it came to their restitution, although objects could be claimed according to the same procedure employed for state collections – that is, by the Ufficio Recupero and the Italian Mission via the network of Collecting Points established by the Western Allies in the occupation zones of Germany and Austria – the path often proved to be fraught with obstacles. This was true of both communal and private Jewish-owned cultural property, though in this case too communal property was prioritised.

The Restitution of Communal Cultural Property

Between the liberation of the country and the end of the 1950s, the restitution of communal property was pursued case by case, through the UCII, local Communities, Siviero's Retrieval Office and the Allied Military Government (AMG). The ability to successfully return Nazi-looted or confiscated cultural property depended on many factors, first and foremost the manner and context of dispossession, the type of property as well as the wartime fate of the objects. While the plundering of cultural property proved particularly systematic in the two Operational Zones, especially in Trieste, the furnishings of the Trieste synagogue managed to survive the war largely unscathed. Although the synagogue had been desecrated by Fascist squads in July 1942 and subsequently requisitioned by the German OZAK authorities as a depository for books, archives and works of art confiscated from Jewish households, the community's silver ritual furnishings — including Torah crowns and finials, pointers, lamps and ceremonial vessels — together with a substantial part of its archives were walled into a hiding place within the building itself, an expedient credited to the Community secretary, Carlo Nathan Morpurgo, who was himself deported and murdered at Auschwitz. After the liberation of the city, the objects were recovered from this cache and restored to liturgical use, serving both the drastically reduced local community as well as the transient population of survivors and displaced persons, for whom Trieste functioned as a port of embarkation for Palestine in these years.

Libraries belonging to different communities were often traced along the north-eastern recovery routes (i.e. via Austria or South Tyrol). In August 1949 the Italian Mission reported that 147 volumes

belonging to the Jewish Community of Trieste had been identified among holdings of the Studienbibliothek at Klagenfurt, while Siviero was called to examine the holdings at Offenbach and Wiesbaden and a further book depot was found at Grundlsee. The restitution of communal libraries proved all together rather arduous. The most documented case is that of the two libraries housed in Rome's Tempio Maggiore and removed by the ERR in October and December 1943, which suffered a starkly different fate, as reconstructed by the Tedeschi Commission.¹²⁵ While a significant portion of the library of the Italian Rabbinical College (CRI) was recovered and returned after the war, the entire contents of the library of the Roman Community — among the country's most significant libraries, comprising over 7,000 volumes collected by different confraternities and synagogues over the centuries, including one-of-a-kind manuscripts, incunabula and Soncino prints — vanished and are still missing to this day.¹²⁶

The bulk of the CRI collection was located by US forces in a Hessian depot at Hungen and channelled to the Offenbach Archival Depot, where staff reconstructed provenance by systematically extracting and collating library stamps and ex-libris. Nineteen “Italian” stamps were eventually isolated, among them that of the CRI, which still bore the indication ‘Firenze’, from the College's former seat. In February 1948 the library was packed in fifty-four crates — for a total of roughly 8,340 items – and subsequently transferred to the Central Collecting Point in Munich. At the end of March 1948, the Italian Mission moved them by military lorry to Bolzano, and on 2 June 1949 the weekly *Israel* announced their return to Rome.

When it came to the Community's library, since the Offenbach staff had assembled thousands of stamps and ex-libris, and since the Roman Library stamps were highly distinctive and unlike any of the others recorded, their absence from the Offenbach records led the Tedeschi Commission to believe that the Community's books never made it to Hungen or to Frankfurt. This was partly confirmed by two reports dated November 1944 and April 1945, which referred to an expected wagon with materials looted in Italy that had gone missing and never arrived. It is possible that the wagon

¹²⁵ See Commissione Tedeschi, *Rapporto finale*. See also the TV special for Italy's main history programme *Passato e Presente*, season 2021/2022: <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2022/01/Passato-e-Presente---Roma-1943-La-razzia-delle-biblioteche-ebraiche---28012022-52b6c996-40ff-4e22-9c96-f4c78bcf41ba.html> (last accessed 22 August 2026).

¹²⁶ The Community Library's ex libris and stamps are still visible as part of the Tedeschi Commission's research material in pdf format here: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://presidenza.governo.it/usri/confeSSIONI/rapporto/4.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwid2Y7HtrSWAxW1xQIHHT-WK5cQFnoECB4QAQ&usg=AOvVaw3-ND58gdy9_0sw7mKrm6dB and as video excerpt here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2216218468705513> (both last accessed 20 August 2026).

containing most of the Community library books was bombed or routed towards Berlin, and thence to the Buchleitstelle at Ratibor or to other book repositories. The hypothesis of an erroneous, good-faith transfer of unidentifiable material to the United States or to Israel also cannot be entirely ruled out, as in the case of other libraries whose stamps were removed, as was customary by Nazi officials – even though the Roman books would have arrived relatively late.¹²⁷ What stood in place of restitution was compensation: the 1961 settlement between the Roman Community and the Federal Republic of Germany indemnifying the extortion of fifty kilograms of gold and of the cash seized from the Community's safe also included the library itself.

Even in the case of the CRI library the restitution was not complete, though: testimony gathered by the Tedeschi Commission indicates that at least twenty valuable incunabula never came back, and isolated volumes have continued to resurface: in May 2005 a 1680 Amsterdam Pentateuch bearing the CRI ex-libris, which had also passed through Hungen, was handed over to the Italian delegation of the Tedeschi Commission at a conference in Hannover. In 2007 the topographical catalogue of the CRI library, apparently the one compiled by Fabian Herskovits and plausibly identifiable with an item listed in the Offenbach *Monthly Report* of 31 May 1947, surfaced at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem by an unexplained route. Most recently, in spring 2026 two items from the CRI holdings and the Talmud Torah confraternity (part of the Community library) — Elisha Gallico's *Peirush Megilath Esther* (Venice, 1583) and the responsa collection *Nahalat Ya'aqov* (Padua, 1622)¹²⁸ — were restored to the Community after appearing on the US antiquarian market thanks to the efforts of the Ministerial Working Group for the Study and Research into Cultural Property stolen from Jews in Italy between 1938 and 1945 as a result of the Racial Laws, operating since 2020 (see Chapter 5).¹²⁹

Elsewhere returns were also often fragmentary: silver plaques and crowns bearing the labels of Trino Vercellese, Milan and Livorno were identified at Merano. In Vercelli, the library was spared, whilst all the other community assets seized by the Nazis and most of the artworks were destroyed or removed,

¹²⁷ The very recent discovery of one volume from the Talmud Torah confraternity, as detailed above, might in fact point in this direction.

¹²⁸ See “Libri antichi razziati restituiti a Comunità ebraica e Ucei”, *Moked*, 14 July 2026, <https://moked.it/2026/07/14/libri-antichi-razziati-restituiti-a-comunita-ebraica-e-ucei/> (last accessed 22 August 2026).

¹²⁹ Gruppo di lavoro per lo studio e la ricerca sui beni culturali sottratti in Italia agli ebrei tra il 1938 e il 1945 a seguito della promulgazione delle leggi razziali, established with Ministerial Decree no. 323 of 17 July 2020 as a subsection of the Comitato per il recupero e restituzione dei beni culturali, Italian Ministry of Culture, <https://cultura.gov.it/comunicato/dm-323-17072020-comitato-per-il-recupero-e-restituzione-dei-beni-culturali-del-gruppo-di-lavoro-per-lo-studio-e-la-ricerca-sui-beni-culturali-sottratti-in-italia-agli-ebrei-tra-il-1938-e-il-1945-a-seguito-della-promulgazione-delle-leggi-razziali> (last accessed 22 August 2026).

and are still missing to this day.¹³⁰ The furnishings of the Alessandria synagogue, which had been carried off or destroyed after the armistice, were never recovered. A small part of the Milan's synagogue silver, looted in November 1943 by an SS squad led by Karl Otto Koch, was retrieved in a private flat which had been occupied by Koch, while four additional items ended up in the depots of the ARAR (Agency for the buyout and alienation of residual war material), established by postwar Italy in October 1945 to collect and sell war materials left by retreating German troops or Allied forces.

The case of cultural objects handled by the ARAR constitutes a particularly troubling chapter in the history of Italy's postwar restitutions. In the ARAR South Tyrol warehouses, alongside items that the ARAR would send to the EGELI to be returned, lay crates containing sacred silver objects and silverware belonging to both Jewish communities and private individuals, all products of Nazi or Fascist raids and looting.¹³¹ Despite the strong anti-fascist credentials of the ARAR leadership, the agency proved rather unresponsive when it came to restoring said silverware. This was particularly true of privately-owned objects, as we shall see. In May 1946 the UCII learned that the ARAR's Rome headquarters had transferred silver, carpets and Judaica from the Merano depot to a savings bank in Milan. An inspection of the Bolzano depot uncovered two crates of Judaica containing silver and religious texts, along with further cases of objects presumed to come from Jewish homes, but the depot's manager refused to guarantee that they would not be sold. The Merano synagogue's request for the return of a looted Sefer Torah was likewise met by the Bolzano office with a demand for money. Following the UCII's vigorous protests, the artworks, valuable books and sacred objects were eventually returned in the course of 1948, while silverware belonging to private individuals would often be sold at public auction, despite awareness of their provenance.

The fate of the Milan ceremonial objects is a good case in point. The four pieces of silverware – a yad, a megillah Esther, a chalice, and a basin – had become subjects of contention as early as 1946, when they landed in the ARAR deposits. Thanks to protests from the UCII, which underlined both the 'undignified fact' that these objects were deemed 'war booty' and their 'grave profanation as sacred objects of the Jewish faith', in 1948 the silverware was transferred to Siviero's Office at the Ministry of Education, where it would however remain for almost four decades.¹³² Only in 1984 did the objects resurface, as part of an exhibition honouring the recently deceased Siviero. Despite numerous protests

¹³⁰ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 159.

¹³¹ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 202.

¹³² See Gaudenzi, "Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy", pp. 382-384.

and the catalogue's clear identification of Milan's Jewish Community as the original owner, the Ministerial committee entrusted with allocation chose to hand the silverware to Milan's Superintendency, prompting the Jewish community to lodge an appeal. The Ministry defended its position by referring to the aforementioned 1950 law – which concerned artworks sold or given voluntarily by Fascist art dealers or *gerarchi* to their Nazi allies. In an unprecedented move, the TAR (Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale, the country's main Administrative Court) upheld the appeal in June 1991, noting that the objects had evidently been forcibly removed, rather than given voluntarily, thereby sanctioning their restitution. So, the silverware could finally return to Milan, with no mention in the national press. This notwithstanding, the TAR ruling constituted the first case in which courts affirmed the principle that the state could not retain plundered objects of Jewish provenance, and this would have significant bearings in the following years.

The Restitution of Private Cultural Property

Notwithstanding all these difficulties, the recovery of communal property still proceeded relatively smoothly in comparison to the generally more protracted and incomplete process of restituting privately-owned artworks, libraries, silverware and other cultural objects confiscated or looted from individual families by Nazi agencies or dignitaries and by German troops. The fate of Elda Luzzatto's library is emblematic in this respect. As detailed in Chapter 1, during the Nazi occupation of Trieste the Pollitzer-Luzzatto family was spoliated of its art collection and several pieces of antique furniture as well as of Elda Luzzatto's prized library, consisting of some 20,000 volumes in six languages, ranging from art history to natural sciences. Immediately after the war, Luzzatto – who had managed to escape deportation by fleeing to Rome – set out to recover her library, which had been marked with an *ex libris* depicting a maple leaf drafted by Angerer & Göschll, Vienna, and should therefore still have been relatively easy to identify. As her son Andrea's heartfelt correspondence testified, the library had above all great sentimental value, both as a memento of lost family members as well as a symbol of that social and cultural status that the Nazis and Fascists had attempted to wipe out. Yet in 1966, four years after his mother's passing, the library still had not been recovered. A very small portion was eventually returned – as testified by the 230 books carrying Luzzatto's *ex libris* donated by the Pollitzer family to

Trieste's public library¹³³ – but up to 17,000 volumes as well as several artistic objects are still missing to this day.¹³⁴

More generally, prominent art collections which had been confiscated in the two Operational Zones were only partly recovered or disappeared entirely. While the Morpurgo de Nilma and Brunner holdings were at least partly returned, the latter now on display at the Civico Museo Morpurgo,¹³⁵ Alberto Schott's bronzes collection and Enrico Schott's rare musical instruments were never recovered.¹³⁶ Neither were Bruno and Gino Pincherle's art collection and library, which were dispersed as customary in the case of OZAK through gifts to Nazi dignitaries, by removal to Austrian libraries or by sale through the Dorotheum auction house in Klagenfurt.¹³⁷ It should be noted that bureaucratic impediments were not limited to the Italian administration. In Trieste, where the AMG's Office of Jewish Property Control operated until 1 April 1949, sums realised from the sale of unidentifiable Jewish objects were released to the local community only after deduction of the Allied administration's research expenses.¹³⁸

The same was true for Italian Jews whose property had been confiscated abroad, as in the renowned case of Italian Jewish collector Federico Gentili (see Chapter 5) or of Riccardo M. Luzzatto's collection of paintings, sculptures and carpets which, together with his library of over 4,000 volumes and a collection of autographs of eminent figures had been confiscated in France and transferred to Germany. Despite sustained postwar efforts to secure restitution, these proved fruitless: the *Office des biens et intérêts privés* recovered only some forty volumes bearing the library's ex libris. A further approach by the Italian Embassy in Paris to the Quai d'Orsay in 1956 elicited only the reply that the office in question had ceased operations and had transferred the remaining objects, whose owners could not be identified, to museums and libraries.¹³⁹

¹³³ See Biblioteca statale Stelio Crise, Fondo Pollitzer: <https://bibliotecacrise.beniculturali.it/biblioteca/il-patrimonio-fondi-e-collezioni-digitali/i-nostri-fondi/> (last accessed 18 August 2026).

¹³⁴ See Brasca, "The Dispossession of Italian Jews", p. 93.

¹³⁵ See Da Dalt, "The Case of Morpurgo de Nilma's Art Collection", pp. 107-122. On the Brunner case see Colusso, "New Findings in Storage at the Museum of Udine", pp. 289-304.

¹³⁶ See Brasca, "The Dispossession of Italian Jews", pp. 79, 87-88.

¹³⁷ See C. Cudicio, "The Dissolution of a Jewish Collection: The Pincherle Family In Trieste", in: *Studi di Memofonte*, 22 (2019), pp. 123-137.

¹³⁸ See Lévy, "Looting Jewish Heritage in the Alpe Adria Region", pp. 28-39.

¹³⁹ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 162.

Particularly difficult if not impossible proved the recovery of artworks which had been initially confiscated by Fascist authorities and later looted by Nazi agencies or German (or even Allied) troops. This was the case of the aforementioned Landau-Finaly and Loeser collections,¹⁴⁰ as well as of a myriad of other individual artworks, musical instruments, books, porcelain, antique coins and many other cultural objects belonging to middle-class and upper-middle-class Jewish families, which constituted the vast majority of postwar claimants – as in the case of Moses Benaim, a British subject, and his wife Elisa Rosselli's beloved Lega painting.¹⁴¹ In this respect, postwar restitutions partly reiterated the class discriminations that had emerged so evidently during Fascist persecutions and the Holocaust, as Jews of lesser means were almost entirely excluded from the process.

The most problematic aspect of the entire process consisted of the few instances in which the Italian Republic withheld looted cultural property that it had managed to salvage at the end of the war. This was once again the case of the ARAR, which was particularly unresponsive when it came to privately-owned cultural objects. In fact, despite holding inventories submitted by several communities as well as private claimants, between December 1947 and February 1948 the ARAR auctioned over 70 kilograms of silver held at its Milan offices, yielding around eight million lire. In one paradoxical case – that of Alessandro Basevi's collection of silverware, which had been looted by the SS from his home in Genoa, despite being walled in under the woodshed – after long and fruitless negotiations with the ARAR, in which Basevi tried to assert his legitimate rights, he resigned himself to repurchasing his own property at ARAR auctions or through other channels. In 1948 he finally obtained a positive response from the ARAR, which in the meantime had located 32 pieces from his collection (for a total of ca. 32 kg, while another 97 kg remained missing). Said pieces were returned only after Basevi had paid to the ARAR 25% of their estimated value. When he subsequently sued the ARAR, he lost because he could not prove that all the silverware belonging to his collection was among the materials recovered by the ARAR.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ On the postwar fate of these collections see Chapter 1.

¹⁴¹ See Siena, Archivio Storico del Monte dei Paschi di Siena, Fondo EGELI, b. 73: Benaim Mosè fu David e Rosselli Elisa fu Angelo.

¹⁴² See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 203. For a comprehensive recollection see E. Basevi, *I beni e la memoria. L'argenteria degli ebrei: piccola scandalosa storia italiana* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2001).

Chapter 3

Reckonings: From the 50th Anniversary of the Racial Laws to the Anselmi Commission, 1988-2001

The 1991 victory of the Milanese Jewish Community with regard to the four ceremonial objects withheld by the Ministry marked the beginning of a phase of partial awakening in Italy on the matter of Holocaust-era dispossessions, after decades of oblivion. The combination of international and domestic factors brought about by the end of the Cold War played a paramount role in this process. On an international scale, the US administration's attempt to yoke the concept of democracy to the post-Cold War neoliberal agenda, exemplified by the waves of privatization in the former Soviet bloc, had significant bearing on the ways in which restitution was conceived and implemented. One of the most evident results was the overwhelming focus on private property which emerged in much of the Central and Eastern European campaigns, as underlined by Regula Ludi.¹⁴³ These developments, coupled with Israel's new role after the Oslo Accords and the higher visibility of Jewish international agencies and advocate groups, also conferred new political weight on local Jewish communities. As a result, the mid- to late-1990s saw a climax in reparation activities across Europe, fuelled by the *Raubgold* and dormant accounts scandals on one side, and the heightened willingness to redress human rights violations rekindled by the atrocities committed in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda on the other.¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile, in Italy the sharp ideological redefinition caused by the dissolution of the USSR prompted the collapse of the PCI and pushed post-communist parties to incorporate anti-racism (and thereby anti-antisemitism) more firmly into their political agenda,¹⁴⁵ whereas the neo-fascist right was undergoing a transformation that would bring some elements to publicly disown Fascist antisemitism. This was accompanied by a complete overhaul of the country's party system through a series of corruption scandals known as *Tangentopoli* ('bribesville'). The end of bipolarity was therefore instrumental in lifting the lid on a blunter assessment of Italy's antisemitic past. Not coincidentally, the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of the Racial Laws, which marked the institutional 'rediscovery' of Italy's antisemitic past, is generally regarded as a turning point in the historiography

¹⁴³ See R. Ludi, "Second-Wave Holocaust Restitution, Post-Communist Privatization, and the Global Triumph of Neoliberalism in the 1990s", in: *Yod* 21 (2018): <https://journals.openedition.org/yod/2597> (last accessed 18 August 2026).

¹⁴⁴ See Gaudenzi, "Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy", pp. 377-394.

¹⁴⁵ See G. Schwarz, "Les saisons de la mémoire: les années 1980 et l'émergence de la Shoah dans le discours public italien", in: *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah* 1 (2017), pp. 47-62.

on the subject.¹⁴⁶ This was part of a broader institutional shift signalled by the 1987 signing of a long-awaited *intesa* (agreement) between the Italian state and the Union, now renamed UCEI, which granted Jewish citizens greater religious freedom and social protections.

All these factors would have significant impact on the unresolved issue of the restitution of Jewish-owned property, as signified by the case of the five ‘saddlebags’ of everyday objects looted from Trieste under Nazi occupation and returned by the Italian state in August 1997. Intercepted by the Allies in Klagenfurt, the objects had first been exhibited with the purpose of identifying their owners in 1954. Only about 80 among survivors and refugees had been able to come forward, however, so all unclaimed objects – weighing a total of 65 kilos and including mostly “miserable remains [...] objects belonging to children, watches and scraps of gold”¹⁴⁷ – were stored at the local treasury. Bureaucratic hurdles prevented the remaining items from being allocated to the UCIL, as sanctioned by the 1947 law, and two years later the objects were transferred to the central treasury, where they would sit for 35 years.

It was only in August 1996 that the secretary of Trieste’s Jewish Community, Elyahu Giorgi, accidentally found early postwar correspondence on the matter. This time the inquiries did not fall on deaf ears, and in February 1997 the treasury announced that they were in possession of the five crates. Not unlike a decade earlier, the ministry established a committee. This time around, however, not only did the commission recommend their immediate restitution but even encouraged the drafting of *ad hoc* legislation. The formulation of the committee’s recommendation illustrates well the significance of this decision from a historical point of view:

Considering the historical and moral meaning of the events through which the items reached the State Treasury, it may become apparent that here exists a sort of ‘natural and moral obligation’ to restitution [...] It is morally and juridically unacceptable [...] for the state to [...] acquire [...] objects the removal of which [...] is documented. After all, it was the state itself – even though at another historical moment and in another constitutional capacity – that made itself substantially responsible for the deportation of those same people whose goods were stolen.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ See V. Galimi, *Sotto gli occhi di tutti. La società italiana e le persecuzioni contro gli ebrei* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2018), pp. 135-139.

¹⁴⁷ “Dopo cinquant’anni... echi di un tragico periodo”, *Bollettino della Comunità Ebraica di Trieste* 64 (1997), p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ Roma, Archivio Storico della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (APCM), Commissione istituita presso il Ministero del Tesoro, “Bozza della relazione finale”, p. 6.

Such open, unprecedented recognition of responsibility by a governmental committee could possibly be credited to the participation of UCEI delegate Dario Tedeschi, a prolific lawyer who would dedicate the latter part of his life to searching for the lost library of the Roman Jewish community. But it was also the product of a broader shift taking place at both a political and a historiographical level and was the result of a particular historical juncture. The generational change and the newly found political weight of Jewish communities – the UCEI in particular – appear crucial here. By not only recognising the complicity in but also the responsibility for the deportation of Jews residing in Italy at the time, the entire committee took a very big step that would remain unsurpassed for several years – and still is, to a certain extent.

The committee's recommendations furthermore led to the drafting of Law 233, entitled "Provisions on Solidarity for Members of Jewish Communities Who Were Previously Persecuted for Racial Reasons," which was swiftly and unanimously approved by Parliament in July 1997 – a rare feat in 1990s Italy.¹⁴⁹ Remedying the technical flaws of the 1947 law, this new piece of legislation ruled that all unclaimed goods still in possession or custody of the state would be assigned to the UCEI, without exception.¹⁵⁰ While still not entirely adequate, as it did not explicitly encompass objects looted by fascists nor no longer identifiable as Jewish-owned, the law represented a crucial step forward and would constitute the legal backbone of future restitution cases up to the present day.¹⁵¹

The Establishment of the Anselmi Commission

The episode of the returned saddlebags represented a sort of precursor to the establishment, the following year, of a specific governmental commission of inquiry. Solicited by UCEI President Tullia Zevi and supported by the centre-left coalition led by economist and future president of the European Commission Romano Prodi, the initiative was then launched by Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, who on 1 December 1998 signed the decree establishing the Commission, entrusted with the task of 'reconstructing the events that in Italy characterised the activities of acquisition of the assets of Jewish

¹⁴⁹ Law no. 233 of 18 July 1997, Disposizioni di solidarietà per gli appartenenti alle Comunità ebraiche ex perseguitati per motivi razziali, ai fini della applicazione della legge 24 maggio 1970, n. 336, e successive modificazioni ed integrazioni, see <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/97233l.htm> (last accessed 18 August 2026).

¹⁵⁰ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 260.

¹⁵¹ See M. Sarfatti, "Le vicende della spoliazione degli ebrei e la commissione Anselmi (1998-2001)", in *Le leggi antiebraiche nell'ordinamento italiano. Razzia, Diritto, Esperienze*, ed. by G. Speciale (Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 2013), pp. 299-311.

citizens by public and private entities'.¹⁵² Its president, Tina Anselmi, a prominent Christian Democrat with strong Resistance and unionist credentials, is still remembered for becoming Italy's first female Minister in 1976 and for her contribution to the restructuring of Italy's national health service, as well as for her resolution to dig into some of the darkest corners of the country's past. This was evidenced by her 1980s inquiry into the subversive activities of the Masonic lodge P2 – responsible for instance for the 1980 neo-fascist bombing of Bologna's central railway station which killed 85 civilians – its collusion with the state apparatus and organised crime.

The establishment of the Commission, which took place in parallel with the Washington Conference on Holocaust-era Assets, fitted well into the broader transnational dynamics sparked across Europe by the political and legislative echoes of US Holocaust litigations. However, compared to analogous European experiences, the Anselmi Commission was born with a series of disadvantages. First, its composition reflected the hybrid, negotiated character of the enterprise. The presence of historians was in fact considerably reduced – only three out of the original thirteen members, which consisted of representatives from five ministries (Interior, Foreign Affairs, Cultural Heritage, Industry and the Treasury), three UCEI delegates, a nominee of the Bank of Italy and representatives of the banking and insurance associations.

While crucial to grant the Commission access to sensitive historical records, this configuration meant that many of its members were unfamiliar with how to conduct archival and historical work, which over the following months prompted the Commission to seek the collaboration of fifteen more external researchers. This notwithstanding, the comparison with similar European commissions still remained striking: in France, the *Mission d'étude sur la spoliation des Juifs de France* (known as the Mattéoli Mission) had been able to count on the work of 149 scholars, while the Austrian *Historikerkommission* (known as the Jabloner Commission) had availed itself of the collaboration of 160 researchers.¹⁵³

Secondly, the Commission had to operate under considerable financial and temporal restraints. In fact, the time initially granted to the Commission – only six months – also contrasted sharply with what had been decided elsewhere in Western Europe: the Austrian and Swiss commissions had been

¹⁵² Commissione per la ricostruzione delle vicende che hanno caratterizzato in Italia le attività di acquisizione dei beni dei cittadini ebraici da parte di organismi pubblici e privati. The Commission's page on the Presidency of the: https://web.archive.org/web/20190331192831/http://presidenza.governo.it/DICA/7_ARCHIVIO_STORICO/beni_ebraici/index.html (last accessed 22 August 2026).

¹⁵³ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 262 ff. and Galimi, *Sotto gli occhi di tutti*, pp. 116-127.

assigned five years each, the French commission four. This seemed to reveal a certain unawareness of the complexity of the investigation that the Commission had been entrusted with conducting – an investigation that suffered from a total absence of specific research on the subject, not to mention the systemically dispersed and fragmented nature of Italy’s archival heritage.¹⁵⁴

Despite these limitations, the Commission conducted a thorough and wide-ranging investigation, often going beyond its officially assigned mandate. Entrusted with ‘reconstructing the events that characterised the acquisition of the assets of Jewish citizens by public and private entities in Italy’, a very convoluted way of avoiding any mention of fascism, looting or antisemitism, the Commission was charged with documenting how, and by whom, Jewish property in Italy had been restricted, seized, managed and, in part, returned. Embedded already in the Commission’s founding decree, which according to Pavan seemed written ‘in a sort of atemporal and ahistorical vacuum’,¹⁵⁵ its mission was therefore explicitly cognitive rather than compensatory and caused the Commission to understand its role as primarily historiographical as well as political – as evinced by its commitment to collecting archival documentation from all over the country and providing the first comprehensive overview of said material. Over roughly two and a half years, the Commission organised a systematic archival survey of unprecedented breadth, covering most of Italy’s main archives, including the Central State Archive, the State Archives of every province – including the prefectural and Questura as well as EGELI holdings – the records of the Ministries of Finance and of the Interiors as well as the archives of the Bank of Italy and of other main banking and insurance companies (see Chapter 4).

In its report, for the first time in postwar Italian history, the Commission highlighted the magnitude and systematic nature of Fascist spoliations on a national scale (see Chapter 1). While confiscations constituted the main subject of the report, a significant chunk was also devoted to restitution activities, documented by a database of all registered returns (see Chapter 4). Here, however, opinions diverged even within the Commission. If some of the Commission members and much of the press still espoused the view that most of what was taken had been returned after the war, historians such as Michele Sarfatti or Ilaria Pavan underlined how this had often not been the case.¹⁵⁶ As for Anselmi herself, she voiced a partial synthesis of the two positions. Whilst she underlined the efforts made by

¹⁵⁴ The only study available on the topic at the time was Levi, *Le case e le cose*; see also Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 263.

¹⁵⁵ Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 265.

¹⁵⁶ See for instance M. Sarfatti, “I beni vennero confiscati e non furono mai restituiti”, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 November 2002, p. 37 and M. Sarfatti, ‘Italiani brava gente? No, volenterosi persecutori’, *L’Unità*, 26 June 1999, p. 17.

the anti-fascist parties to repeal antisemitic legislation in the 1944-1947 period, she also highlighted the strong reticence – if not outright opposition – displayed by large sections of the judiciary and public administration, as best exemplified by the 1960 ruling, which she dubbed as ‘amply debatable’ ‘from a moral standpoint’.¹⁵⁷

While the Commission’s initial report had received ample visibility in the national press, with several big-circulation dailies reporting for the first time on the systematic nature of Fascist spoliation – by focusing on emotional details such as the confiscation of children’s toothbrushes, rather than on the endogenous nature of antisemitic expropriations, with little or no mention of the issue of restitution – by the time the final 540-page *Rapporto generale* came out the tide had already begun to turn. Delivered in the closing weeks of a legislature and published in a limited institutional edition, the final report attracted modest press coverage, generated no sustained parliamentary debate and was not followed by legislation.¹⁵⁸ This was all the more frustrating as, in line with several other European commissions – including the Mattéoli, from whose work the Anselmi had drawn extensively – the Commission had made very clear recommendations, starting with the establishment of a body which would be “responsible for receiving requests and facilitating their resolution.”¹⁵⁹

Interest in the Commission’s findings faded very quickly, and within a few days almost complete oblivion had already enveloped the entire affair. At the end of May, Tina Anselmi, in an interview with *La Repubblica*, appealed to the government not to let the work be forgotten, underlining that especially for the postwar phase of restitutions very much still needed to be done.¹⁶⁰ Things did not improve with the forming of the new centre-right government led by Berlusconi and his ‘post-fascist’ allies. The Commission’s work was consigned to oblivion. Still ten months later, Tina Anselmi publicly denounced how the printed copies of the report still “lay in a deposit somewhere” and were being held back despite the legal requirement to distribute it to every MP and office in the country.¹⁶¹ This final polemical intervention in the press effectively closed the very limited public space reserved for the Commission’s work. It was not all for naught, however. At the end of November 2002, Berlusconi finally instituted a second commission entrusted with researching the fate of the libraries of the Roman

¹⁵⁷ Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁸ See Gaudenzi, “Cultural Restitution and the ‘Rediscovery’ of the Holocaust in Italy”, pp. 389-391.

¹⁵⁹ Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 8. Such a body still has not been established. In 2020 the Ministry of Culture created the aforementioned Working Group, which however has only advisory powers and no funding.

¹⁶⁰ See Pavan, *Beyond the Things Themselves*, p. 270.

¹⁶¹ “Intervista a Tina Anselmi”, *L’Unità*, 28 January 2002.

Jewish community (see Chapter 2). This follow-up commission tellingly focused on one of the few cases of looting by the Nazis – rather than the Fascists – and would constitute the only official response of the country's national institutions.

This notwithstanding, over the years the work of the Anselmi Commission would have a very significant impact first and foremost at the historiographical level but also, in very few instances, at the practical level. This was the case of Julius Kaumheimer's aforementioned porcelain collection, which after its confiscation in January 1939 had remained at the Castello di Buonconsiglio museum in Trent for six decades, until Trent's provincial administration, in an unprecedented move, decided for its restitution in 2003. After the end of the Second World War, the Kaumheimer heirs had in fact tried to claim the collection back but had always been met with refusals, motivated by the fact that Kaumheimer had neglected to request an export licence, in contravention of the 1909 law. As a result, the expropriation was recognised as legal by postwar authorities. The fact that the family was fleeing persecution did not seem to matter.

Still in 2000, in response to the Anselmi Commission's inquiries, local authorities had reiterated their rightful ownership of the collection, 'notwithstanding the tragic and very painful fact that the person accused of the crime [of smuggling] was a Jew forced to flee because of the Racial Laws'.¹⁶² A few months later, however, the centre-left council of the Trent province decided to intervene, sanctioning its restitution to the Jewish community. The motivation underlined the need to 'give full recognition to the dramatic story of Mr Julius Kaumheimer and his family, whose peaceful existence was swept up by the racism that marks indelibly the Nazi-Fascist dictatorships of Germany and Italy [...] placing him in such a state of absolute necessity that makes such bureaucratic application of legal norms [...] while remaining insensible to the underlying human drama appear odious to our collective conscience'.¹⁶³ As a result, in October 2001 the collection was first returned to the Merano Community and in 2003, once located, to the surviving heirs.

The Kaumheimer restitution case represented a milestone, as it concerned objects confiscated by the Fascist state and withheld by the Republic. It also put in sharp relief the significant divergence in attitudes between the centre-right political leadership and the centre-left civil administration. More

¹⁶² Roma, ACS, Fondo Anselmi, b. 61, Lettera da Claudio Molinari all'On. Anselmi, 23 May 2000. See also "La confisca fu legittima", *Il Mattino dell'Alto Adige*, 20 May 2000, p. 22.

¹⁶³ Quoted in F. Steinhaus, "I Kaumheimer: storia di una famiglia e di una collezione di porcellane antiche", in: *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 75, no. 1-2 (2009), pp. 37-44.

importantly, it remained an isolated case, possibly because of this discrepancy. The window of political opportunity was in fact going to close very soon without effecting long-lasting administrative changes. The Kaumheimer example was also revealing of another of the main weaknesses of Italy's road to restitution, i.e. its mostly disjointed and local character. If the porcelains were returned by virtue of the 1997 law, their restoration resulted from the isolated "goodwill" of Trent's centre-left administration, rather than from any concerted centralised effort. While the prevalence of local over central initiatives represents one of the many peculiarities of the Italian system, in this case it was also a palpable sign that not much changed at the national level, despite the UCEI's and Anselmi's efforts.¹⁶⁴ Despite the Commission's inquiries, for instance, wholly vain were the solicitations that the heirs of Federico Gentili repeatedly made to the Pinacoteca di Brera from the early 2000s to recover a 1538 painting by Girolamo di Romano, known as *il Romanino*, which would eventually be restored to the family after the painting had been loaned to a US museum in 2011 (see Chapter 5).

¹⁶⁴ See Gaudenzi, "Cultural Restitution and the 'Rediscovery' of the Holocaust in Italy", pp. 391-392.

Part II

Research and Restitution in present-day Italy

Chapter 4

State of the archives and research tools

Historical and provenance research into Fascist- and Nazi-looted art in Italy still presents quite a few challenges. Not dissimilarly to other countries, research into singular objects or collections requires researchers to confront and intertwine a usually wide variety of primary sources, located in different archives across the country.

These relate to **three main categories of primary sources**, i.e.:

- 1) **Unpublished official documents**, relating to both the 1938-1945 and the post-1945 periods, including:
 - **import/export license** applications at local heritage export offices, customs offices, etc.
 - **shipping manifests** and **insurances** by sea/land transport and insurance companies, sometimes included in the export license requests or held at the few remaining companies' archives (such as the sea transport company Lloyd Triestino)
 - **property exchange documentation**, such as notary purchase/sale/*ipoteche* deeds, property, real estate and land registers, etc.
 - **administrative documents** relating to persecution and spoliation measures by Fascist state bodies, first and foremost:
 - Interior Ministry (for instance the Demorazza, the General Directorate for demography and race, established in July 1938; the Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione Polizia Politica, with subdivisions on 'foreigners', 'Jews' etc.)
 - Finance Ministry (for instance the Intendenza di finanza, the inland revenue offices, the Servizio beni ebraici, the Jewish assets service, the EGELI and the Istituto

- Nazionale per i Cambi con l'Esterio, INCE, the national institute for foreign exchange)
 - Ministry of National Education (esp. the General Directorate for Antiquities and Fine Arts, Second and Third Divisions, focusing mostly but not exclusively on state-owned collections)
 - Presidency of the Council of Ministers (including the Gabinetto della Presidenza, for both the 1938-1943 and the 1943-1945 periods)
- **seizure/confiscation lists** by a variety of Fascist and Nazi authorities, including but not limited to:
 - EGELI and its subsidiaries (19 regional/national banks and credit institutions, including Compagnia di San Paolo, Cariplo or Monte dei Paschi)
 - Superintendencies
 - customs offices
 - other local Fascist institutions, such as the Uffici Affari Ebraici (Offices for Jewish Affairs), police/public order bodies like the Questure and Prefetture, or even city/provincial administrations
 - Nazi occupation authorities (as for other European countries)
- **administrative documents** relating to the management of seized/confiscated property by the EGELI and other spoliation agencies, including in particular:
 - yearly/monthly summaries of their activities (usually organised by province and by surname)
 - rental or possible sale of confiscated immovable and movable assets
- official **surveys** and **correspondence** with **local and national Jewish administrative bodies**, first and foremost the UCII and respective local communities, relating to lost property, war damages applications, restitution claims, heirless property, disputes with postwar bodies such as the EGELI and ARAR, etc.
- **restitution applications** by Jewish citizens to the Allied and local postwar administration, including related restitution procedures by institutions such as:
 - MFA&A offices and more generally ACC (Allied Control Commission) administration

- German/Austrian museums, galleries and heritage administration
- EGELI and its affiliates (including disputes over unwarranted taxes, storage fees, rental arrears or sale of confiscated property)
- Ufficio per il recupero delle opere d'arte e del materiale librario e archivistico (Siviero Archive)
- local Superintendencies
- local CLN (Committee for National Liberation) administrations
- Presidency of the Council of Ministers (esp. the Gabinetto della Presidenza, with material relating to 'Jews', 'EGELI' or 'retrieval of works of art')
- ARAR (Azienda Rilievo Alienazione Residuati, the Agency for the buyout and alienation of residual war material), including disputes for withholding looted cultural property, as detailed above
- city/regional and other local bodies
- **lawsuits** filed by Jewish citizens against the EGELI and other institutions (ARAR, city administration, etc.) to restore their property rights, at different instances of judgement – from first degree to the Corte d'Assise Straordinarie, the Extraordinary Court of Assizes, special judicial bodies set up at the end of the Second World War to judge people accused of collaborating with German occupying forces and of fascist-era crimes)
- **postwar surveys** on missing cultural assets (mostly public-owned, but also Jewish-owned) by the Ufficio Recupero, local Heritage boards, local Jewish communities (including the 1977 Mortara Ottolenghi report), etc.

2) **Unpublished private primary sources**, including:

- **diaries** and unpublished **memoirs** (written at the time)
- private **correspondence** (with family members, friends, official bodies etc.)
- property **registries**, **catalogues**, purchase/sale **deeds**, etc.
- **expertise** or **authentication** requests for privately-owned artworks
- **photos** or **plans** of family home or single rooms

3) **Published primary sources, search engines and databases**, including:

- **auction** or **exhibition catalogues**
- **yearbooks** (*annuari*) or **commercial guides** listing antiquaries' shops and art galleries
- **travel guides** (some of the few Italy-based notable Jewish collectors lived in homes that were sometimes the subject of contemporary travel guides so might include details of the art collections)
- **press** clippings – a few of Italy's main newspaper archives are now searchable online, for instance:
 - *La Stampa*: <http://www.archiviolaStampa.it/>
 - *Corriere della Sera*: <https://archivio.corriere.it/Archivio/interface/landing.html>
 - *Il Messaggero*: <https://archivio.ilmessaggero.it/>
 - *L'Avanti*: <https://avanti.senato.it/controller.php?page=archivio-pubblicazione>
 - *L'Unità* (since 1946, years 1924-1945 currently not available online): https://archive.org/details/archivio_unita
 - *Gazzetta Ufficiale*: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/ricerca/pdf/foglio_ordinario1/1/0/0?reset=true
- **memoirs** (often written much later in life so not always reliable as provenance source, but very important exceptions)
- Anselmi Commission's **database of Jewish assets**,¹⁶⁵ organised in four different categories:
 1. confiscation decrees (organised by surname; company; province; withholding institutions/companies)
 2. restitution procedures (organised by surname and banking institution)
 3. list of registered Jewish businessmen/women (by province)

¹⁶⁵ The databases are available at a few public libraries and archives still holding a paper copy of the Anselmi Report but is no longer available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20190331192831/http://presidenza.governo.it/DICA/7_ARCHIVIO_STORICO/beni_ebraici/index.html (last accessed 20 August 2026).

4. legislative appendix, detailing all laws, decrees and newsletters relating to the spoliation of Jewish assets, the abolition of the Racial Laws, and the restoration of rights to Jewish citizens, from 1943 (not 1938) to 2001
- **online databases** specific to Italy (or to looted property, both non-Jewish and Jewish):
 - Databases of **Holocaust survivors** and **Holocaust victims in Italy** by the CDEC (Contemporary Jewish Documentation Centre): <https://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-opac/search/person>
 - Database of **foreign Jews interned in Italy** during the war: <https://www.annapizzuti.it/> and database **Jewish displaced persons** in Italy, 1943-1951: <https://www.annapizzuti.it/database/ricercairo2.php?a=reset>
 - **lost and looted objects** databases of the **Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale** (TPC, Protection of Cultural Heritage), focusing especially on state-owned cultural property but also including Jewish-owned: <https://www.carabinieri.it/in-vostro-aiuto/servizi/banche-dati>¹⁶⁶
 - **photographic library** and general **auction catalogue** databases of the art-historical **Fondazione Federico Zeri**, University of Bologna: <https://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/>
 - **General Catalogue of Cultural Assets** database of the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation (ICCD) of the Ministry of Culture, searchable by location; artist; type of artwork; artistic school etc.: <https://www.catalogo.beniculturali.it/>
 - few **museum websites** include complete/partial databases of their collections, such as the Musei Reali, Turin; Galleria Borghese, Rome; Peggy Guggenheim collection, Venice
 - **SIUSA** (Unified information system for non-state public and private archives) provides detailed descriptions of relevant archival holdings/personalities etc: <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/>

¹⁶⁶ Only sections of the database are freely accessible online, for detailed inquiries please contact the TPC Unit.

Difficulties and pitfalls of archival research into looted art in Italy

It should be noted that in the case of Italy, researchers are faced with a few **extra hurdles**, including first and foremost:

- 1) **Limited, intermittent or no access** to both public and private archives, often due to a chronic lack of funding and personnel (esp. in public archives, but not exclusively); cataloguing or (less frequently) digitalization projects (as in the case of the Siviero archive in Rome); bureaucratic hurdles and more generally a lingering underestimation of the relevance of the topic – although in recent years important exceptions have been made, for instance the Intesa San Paolo EGELI project in Milan.¹⁶⁷
- 2) **Difficulty in locating the sources**, due to either their destruction – through extensive war damage or wilful obliteration by Fascist or Nazi authorities, but also postwar inadvertent damage or loss caused by negligence or lack of funding, or even natural disasters (as in the case of the 1966 flood in Florence) – as well as to the repeated restructuring or downsizing of the institutions involved.

A good case in point is that of the Superintendencies, the archives of which often underwent several rounds of reorganisation, being split up or merged differently over the past six decades, and were consequently moved and catalogued differently city by city, making the material difficult or even impossible to locate.

- 3) The **lack of centralized archives** relating to the issue, with the exception of the Anselmi archival holdings (held at the Central National Archives) and the Siviero Archive, both located in Rome, as well as the NARA material relating to the activities of the MFA&A offices in Italy. Despite Italy's centralised system, in fact, most sources can only be located through **extensive in-person research at local level**.

For instance, this applies to postwar trials, as – unlike West Germany – no central body was created to settle restitution cases, so Jewish citizens had to apply to local tribunals, at different instances of judgement – including, but by no means limited to, the aforementioned Extraordinary Courts of Assizes, which thanks to a considerable research endeavour by the National Institute Ferruccio Parri and the ANPI (Italy's National Partisans' Association) are gradually being made searchable online by type of crime (including theft/robbery/looting).¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ See the digitisation project of the Cariplo EGELI holdings carried out by the Historical Archive on the Intesa San Paolo bank in Milan: <https://asisp.intesasanpaolo.com/egeli/> (last accessed 10 August 2026).

¹⁶⁸ See https://www.straginazifasciste.it/?page_id=139 (last accessed 10 August 2026).

- 4) An additional difficulty relates to the generally rather **succinct or generic nature of confiscation lists**, which – if at all present – often simply mention the type/number of objects (for instance ‘two bronze vases’), with no detail about the artwork’s subject, maker, measures, epoch or any other feature that might help identify the object.
- 5) Last but not least, because of the evolving nature of antisemitic legislation, the **period 1938-1943** proves **particularly difficult** to research. During this phase, the vast majority of losses of cultural assets took place via **forced sales, auctions, exchanges** or even **safekeeping**, starting as early as spring 1938 (probably following Hitler’s visit to Italy), and more consistently from September 1938, as a result of either the expulsion of foreign Jews or the sudden dismissal from their jobs, in the case of Italian Jews.

While EGELI records prove very thorough in identifying the so-called ‘quote eccedenti’, i.e. the ‘surplus quota’ of immovable (and movable) properties that Jews were allowed to own, this initially concerned a minority of Jewish citizens, while the majority was forced to sell, pawn or mortgage their belongings to survive after being forced out of their jobs or losing their livelihood.

Overview of relevant archival holdings

As mentioned above, the by far most helpful body of sources is the one painstakingly collected by the Anselmi Commission between 1998 and 2001 and held at the Central State Archives in Rome (ACS). Besides bringing together a substantial portion of the documentation from the Finance, Interior and Education Ministries and the ACC, the **Fondo Anselmi** provide copies of detailed material relating to the expropriation of Jewish citizens held at most of the country’s State Archives (organised by province), and most of the country’s main banking institutions, together with material from the UCII/UCEI, local chambers of commerce, and other public and private bodies (including material relating to postwar trials).

While crucial to reconstruct both the general and local expropriation measures, the 125 folders that constitute the Fondo Anselmi held at the ACS deal with Jewish-owned property as a whole, with only a couple of folders dealing exclusively with cultural property. Research into looted artworks is possible by province, but looted artworks are not always identifiable, as mentioned above. The Fondo Anselmi is complemented by the **Fondo Carucci**, relating to the activities of one of the members of the Commission, Paola Carucci, at the time Superintendent of ACS.

The most efficient to research looted artworks or collections therefore seem to be to triangulate between the Fondo Anselmi and the two other comprehensive holdings dealing exclusively with looted art (not only Jewish), that is the so-called **Siviero Archive** (Rome) and the **MFA&A material** held at NARA/TNA.

Once the researcher has gained a good grasp of the general context through these documents, research is best carried out **at local level** through a variety of archives, as detailed in the table below. While not exhaustive, for obvious reasons, this table is designed to provide researchers with **practical suggestions on how and where to locate relevant material** (as detailed above), and whenever possible how to get in touch with and access relevant institutions.

As mentioned above, two particularly helpful tools in locating relevant holdings/archives are the **SIAS** (the Unified information system for state archives) and the **SIUSA** (Unified information system for public and private archives of non-state bodies, such as universities, foundations, private families, individuals etc.). These include a significant number of online archive catalogues, with detailed descriptions of their contents, as well as a searchable database to locate archival holdings relating to specific themes, personalities, bodies, etc, see <https://sias-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/pagina.pl> and <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/>.

Please keep in mind that the majority of historical archives in Italy requires researchers to **apply for access** (either online, via email or phone) and might take a week or more to respond, in most cases. Most of the more specialised archives will also have **specific visiting hours/days**. Make sure to check the online catalogues thoroughly whenever possible to be able to **ask for material in advance** (either via email or through online portals).

By law public archives across Italy now allow researchers to **photograph archival material**, provided that it is for research purposes (not for profit).

Archival holdings relating to fascist-looted art in Italy			
name/type of archive, location	relevant holdings/material	webpage/contact details	notes
Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS, Central State Archive), Rome	Several holdings, including: - Fondo Anselmi - Fondo Carucci - Archivi di Enti pubblici, privati e società (incl. EGELI, ARAR etc.) - Finance Ministry (incl. EGELI, Servizio beni ebraici, Intendenza di finanza, INCE) - Interior Ministry (Demorazza, Questure, Prefetture, DGPS etc.) - Education Ministry (DG Antichità e Belle Arti, Export requests etc.) - Gabinetto Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM) - Allied Control Commission (ACC) - Segreteria personale del Duce (sometimes including letters and pleas by foreign Jews and/or their non-Jewish spouses)	https://acs.cultura.gov.it/modalita-di-accesso-e-regolamento/ NB: for Anselmi and Carucci holdings contact Sala Araldica: acs.salaaraldica@cultura.gov.it	NB: the Gabinetto PCM and other relevant holdings are currently inaccessible due to cataloguing/digitalisation (as of summer 2026)
Archivio di Stato (State Archives)	Several holdings, including: - Prefettura - Questura 'Ebrei' - EGELI - Customs office - Intendenze di Finanza - postwar trials (Tribunale ordinario, Corte di Assise, Corte d'Assise straordinaria, Corte d'appello etc., usually by perpetrator's surname)	Located all over Italy, contact each archive independently, overview at: https://sias-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/pagina.pl In most cases both access and material can easily be booked online: https://salastudio-archivi.cultura.gov.it/	Holdings and catalogues might be organised differently from archive to archive, but all searchable via SIAS system (incl. online catalogues etc.)
Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Ministero degli Affari	Material relating esp. to restitution claims abroad as well as the RSI (Italian Social Republic) holdings NB: the Foreign Office usually does not transfer its archival	Detailed information available here: https://www.esteri.it/it/temi/uap/archivi	Researchers can register, book your visit and order material via the online portal: https://asd.esteri.it/default.aspx Please note that as of February 2026 at

Esteri (Foreign Office), Rome	holdings to the Central State Archive, as common with other ministries. The portion relating to the so-called Siviero Archive has recently been transferred to the DGA (see below)	o-storico-e-biblioteca/archivio-storico-diplomatico/servizi-allutenza/	least until the autumn access is granted to only 8 researchers a day (due to building works)
Archivio Storico del Comune (City Historical Archives)	Each archive may vary, but most will include some information on: ▪ ‘censimento della razza’ (1938 “Racial” census) or ‘Ebrei’ ▪ ‘confiscation’, ‘retrieval’ or ‘restitution’ of Jewish-owned assets ▪ urban planning; real estate management	Located all over the country, each archive needs to be contacted independently, most are identifiable and searchable via SIUSA: https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it or their own portal	City archives might be helpful to establish whether someone was classified as ‘Jewish’ by the 1938 census; verify personal data and residence as submitted to registry offices, and major changes to immovable property (esp. homes)
Archivi notarili distrettuali (local Notary archives)	notary registers (usually organised by year and surname) sale/purchase/ <i>ipoteche</i> deeds last wills and testaments	Located all over Italy, comprehensive list with contact details for each: https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_fo_rm_submit.page?uid=G_MAP&pagina=2&ricerca_libera=Archivio%20notarile&xml=html&Submit=cerca	Notary archives do not allow photo reproductions of material; researchers can request original copies for a fee (also by email, by providing surname of the notary; date of the deed; registration no.)
Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio (ABAP)	Each superintendency may have catalogued the materials differently, usually chronologically then thematically. Files on ‘confiscation’, ‘seizure’, ‘war damages’, ‘war losses’, ‘restitution’, ‘retrieval’ etc may include Jewish-owned artworks; word search ‘Ebrei’ or specific surnames might also help NB: make sure to also check papers and correspondence by specific superintendents for the years concerned	Most historical archives include general description of holdings online, or via SIUSA (https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it); overview of current Fine Arts Superintendencies:	NB: these archives have been moved and restructured repeatedly, so make sure to locate the right section (Archaeology, Fine arts, Archives etc.)

		https://cultura.gov.it/enti/soprintendenze-archeologia-belle-arti-e-paesaggio	
Archives of the Committees for National Liberation	Contains immediate post-war reconnaissance, epuration and restitution measures implemented by the local and national anti-fascist Committees for National Liberation, correspondence with individual claimants, local Jewish communities, press clippings etc.	Located at different Historical Institutes for the Study of the Resistance across the country, most of which have online catalogues, see for instance the Florence one: https://www.istoresistenzatoscana.it/archivio/	Access is usually granted after contacting the Institute by email and booking an appointment
Ufficio Esportazione (Export Office)	Similarly to superintendencies, historical archives might have been moved or allocated differently over the years. Chronological, thematic and word search are advised for this material as well	Present-day Offices usually include at least a portion of their historical archive, but need to be contacted case-by-base, for an overview see online system SUE: https://sue.cultura.gov.it/SUE/FE/SUE/pageHome.aspx	
Historical archive of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI, formerly UCII), Rome	Organised chronologically (1934-1948, 1948-1964, 1965-1986 etc.) and thematically, includes material relating to confiscations; EGELI; war losses/war damage applications; civil rights reintegration (incl. property); postwar correspondence with Ministries, Retrieval Office and Allied administration, as well as great collection of local Jewish communities' bulletins and magazines	Email archivistorico@ucei.it for in-person access (check online catalogues and digitised material first)	Most catalogues are now searchable (and partly digitised) online: http://archivistorico.ucei.it/ucei-web/
Historical Archives of local Jewish communities	Organised chronologically and thematically, each archive includes different holdings, but most will include information on the Community's members; confiscations/seizures; EGELI; war losses/damages; 'beni ebraici'; restitution procedures; correspondence with Allied and postwar Italian administration; postwar trials	16 archives located all over Italy, incl. Rome, Florence, Turin, Trieste, Pisa etc., with over 100 holdings, all searchable via SIUSA: https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-	NB: access is usually granted by the Archivist on specific hours/days, as for every other archive, please arrange ahead

		bin/siusa/pagina.pl?RicVM=ricercasemplice&RicFrmRicSemplice=comunit%C3%A0%20ebraica&RicPag=3&RicSez=produttori	
Fondazione CDEC (Contemporary Jewish Documentation Centre), Milan	Exceptional research centre which provides online databases, photographic, video and digital libraries and material, including: ▪ online databases of Jews in Italy, Holocaust victims and survivors: https://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-opac/search/person ▪ personal papers, diaries and correspondence: https://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-opac/group/hist/carte-personali-e-famiglia ▪ digital records of looted Jewish communal libraries ▪ digital copies of Jewish newspapers and magazines: https://www.cdec.it/stampa-ebraica/	Email cdec@cdec.it for in-person access (check online databases and digitised material first)	NB: includes Historical archive of Milan's and other Jewish communities; library with over 33,000 volumes and 800 theses on Jewish life and history in the Italian peninsula
Shoah Foundation interviews	433 Italian-language interviews conducted by the USC Shoah Foundation	searchable online through the Central State Archives: http://www.shoah.acs.beniculturali.it/ or directly through the USC Shoah Foundation: https://sfi.usc.edu/	
Retrieval Office (Siviero Archive), Rome	Originally located at the Historical Archive of the Foreign Office, the archive includes material relating to the activities of the Retrieval Office from the end of WWII to the 1980s. The new catalogue will allow researchers to search by surname, artwork or place	NB: since 2018 the archive is no longer held at a public archive as it has undergone comprehensive re-cataloguing by the General Directorate of Archives (DGA); as a result, access is restricted but can be arranged by contacting the DGA: dg-a@cultura.gov.it	
Museo Casa Rodolfo Siviero (Siviero Museum), Florence	private papers/diaries, publications professional and private correspondence art collection	https://casamuseosiviero.toscana.it/ , for access please email: casasiviero@regione.toscana.it	The museum is currently undergoing renovations, so it is not accessible at present (summer 2026)
Accademia delle arti del disegno di Firenze	Copies of documents held at the Retrieval Office archive (see above), run by Siviero until 1984, but also his original diaries and daily planners from 1921 to 1983, as well as a photographic library of looted or returned artworks and of retrieval operations after the end of the war	Email info@aadfi.it or phone +39 055219642	For an overview of the Accademia visit https://www.aadfi.it/
Museums and	Accessing museum/gallery archives is often very difficult and time-	NB: only very few museums made their collections searchable	

Galleries (both public and private)	consuming, but may be helpful not only to carry out provenance research into their collections but also to consult unpublished records (papers, correspondence, auction catalogues etc.) of specific collectors, scholars or dealers, who may have bequeathed them to the institution – as in the case of the Archive of Ludwig Pollak, held at the Museo Barracco, Rome	online; even fewer have carried out any provenance research into their holdings, with important exceptions (for instance Collezione Cerruti, Castello di Rivoli)	
Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee (ASAC, Biennale Archive), Porto Marghera, Venice	documents relating to conservation, documentation and curatorial activities at La Biennale di Venezia since 1895, includes extensive information on individual artworks but also collectors, artists and dealers, including an online database of its collections	https://www.labiennale.org/it/asac , for an appointment please email consultazione.asac@la.biennale.org	Search the online database first: https://asac.labiennale.org/
Banking and credit institutions	Fondo EGELI, incl. correspondence with Jewish citizens (both 1938-1945 and post-1945), seizure/confiscation lists, management surveys, restitution claims etc.	contact each archive independently, for first research results and overview see Anselmi Report (pp. 25-6, 30-1, 42-5, 345-468)	NB: see esp. research projects by Compagnia San Paolo (Turin) and CARIPLO (Milan): https://archivistorico.fondazione1563.it/oggetti/98550-iii-gestioni-egeli-ente-di-gestione-e-liquidazione-immobiliare-dell-istituto-di-san-paolo-di-torino/ and https://asisp.intesasanpaolo.com/egeli/names-egeli
Camere di commercio (Chambers of commerce)	Business registration and activities, change of ownership, sale/purchase, bankruptcy etc.	Located all over the country, each archive needs to be contacted independently, most are identifiable and searchable via SIUSA: https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it	helpful to establish whether certain businesses were classified as 'Jewish' according to Racial Laws; their expropriation and subsequent owners etc.
Transport and insurance companies	shipping manifests and insurances by sea/land transport and insurance companies NB: most transport companies no longer exist or have destroyed their historical archive (or had it destroyed during the war), with a few important exceptions; information about them can still be found in export license requests (both locally	Very few remaining company archives, such as the sea transport company Lloyd Triestino: https://archividellascie	Insurance companies are notoriously difficult to access, refer to Anselmi Report, pp.

	at the Ministry holdings at ACS)	nza.org/en/archivio/IT-MUST-GUI001-002072	
Archivio diaristico nazionale (National diary archive), Pieve Santo Stefano (Arezzo)	Private diaries by common citizens, relating to Fascist anti-Jewish persecutions, Nazi occupation, hiding, thefts/looting, deportations (more than 65 diaries are flagged when word searching 'Jews' between 1938 and 1950, over 100 diaries on 'racial persecutions')	contact details: http://archiviodiari.org/index.php/contatti.html (check online catalogue first)	Online catalogue: https://catalogo.archiviodiari.it/
Art History Foundations, Research Institutions, with photographic libraries	Wide variety of institutions across Italy that hold expertise requests, private papers and correspondence of specific art historians, collectors or dealers, as well as impressive photographic libraries, such as: Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome Fondazione 1653, Turin Fondazione Federico Zeri, Bologna Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz I Tatti - Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance studies, Florence Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi, Florence Gabinetto Vieusseux, Florence Fondazione Centro Studi sull'Arte Ragghianti, Lucca Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice Archivio Storico Nazionale dei Restauratori Italiani, Lurano (Bergamo)	Please refer to respective institutional websites	Most institutions provide detailed online catalogues of their holdings, searchable by surname of art scholar, critic, dealer or collector
University archives	Several universities across Italy hold private papers, correspondence or expertise by renowned art critics and scholars, such as the Archivio Morassi at Venice Ca'Foscari, the Fondo Vasari at the University of Parma or other personal holdings at the University of Udine	Please refer to respective institutional websites	Most universities provide detailed online catalogues

Chapter 5

Provenance and Restitution: the Current State of Affairs in Italy

In 2024, together with the “Best Practices for the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art”, presented on 5 March 2024 on occasion of the 25-years jubilee of the Washington Principles, the World Jewish Restitution Organisation and the Claims Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany published the report “Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview”.¹⁶⁹ The report evaluates the recent progress in implementing the Washington Principles in the 47 countries that have endorsed both the Washington Principles in 1998 and the Terezin Declaration of 2009. According to such, Italy is amongst thirteen countries that have made “some progress”, thus stepping up one scale from the last report in 2014, where Italy had been rated as of “little to no progress”.¹⁷⁰

The following chapter aims to assess this recent progress both by examining the small improvements as well as by stressing those aspects where Italy is still lacking notably behind in comparison to other European countries. Whilst scientific and public awareness on Italy’s historical role has increased (see 5.1) and some restitutions have taken place over the past years (see 5.2), on the other side several Italian cultural institutions currently do not engage with claimants (5.3), nor does the majority of them or the national art market generally conduct Nazi-era provenance research (5.4).

5.1 Public and Scientific Interest in the Topic

Similar to other countries, Italy’s public interest has generally grown over the past years thanks to numerous popular culture publications,¹⁷¹ documentaries and films, as well as to the 2023 exhibition “Arte Liberata: capolavori salvati dalla Guerra, 1937-1947”, held at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome between 16 December 2002 and 10 April 2023, that came with a comprehensive educational

¹⁶⁹ See W. A. Fisher/R. J. Weinberger, *Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview*, 5 May 2024, <https://art.claimscon.org/advocacy/holocaust-era-looted-cultural-property-a-current-worldwide-overview/> (last accessed on 13 December 2025), pp. 62-65.

¹⁷⁰ See W. A. Fisher/R. J. Weinberger, *Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current World-Wide Overview*, 10 September 2014, https://www.lootedart.com/web_images/pdf2014/Worldwide-Overview.pdf (last accessed on 17 December 2025), p. 30.

¹⁷¹ See, among others F. Isman, *L’arte razziata dai nazisti. Gli ultimi prigionieri di guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2025); A. Magno Marzo, *Missione Grande Bellezza. Gli eroi e le eroine che salvarono i capolavori italiani saccheggianti da Napoleone e da Hitler* (Milan: Garzanti, 2017); L. Scarlini, *Siviero contro Hitler. La battaglia per l’arte* (Milan: Skira, 2014).

programme and vast media coverage.¹⁷² Although this signals a positive development in terms of public apprehension, scholars have noted that within this framework the narrative often seems to be stuck in postwar perspectives, therefore focusing on the heroic safeguarding of Italian cultural heritage thanks to the Allies vis-à-vis the looting practices by the Nazis, rather than critically addressing the active involvement of the Fascist government in the dispossessions of Jewish property or raising concerns regarding the potential presence of Nazi or Fascist looted cultural goods in Italian public collections.¹⁷³ A critical awakening in Italy's society has therefore still yet to take place.

Scientific Initiatives and Research Projects

The most notable progress on the recognition of the various themes related to Nazi and Fascist-era provenance research is visible in academic circles, after the substantial progress made in parallel to the Anselmi Commission by historians such as Fabio Levi and Ilaria Pavan. Of particular relevance was the four-year transnational research project TransCultAA (2016-2020), that investigated the transfer of cultural objects in the Alpe Adria Region during the 20th century – tackling in particular issues around ‘historical and current conflicts of ownership, patrimony and cultural heritage’.¹⁷⁴ Aside from the numerous conferences and (online) exhibitions realised during the project, the research group also summarised its findings in a series of important publications, which reflect a notable progress regarding the knowledge of the confiscation, looting and translocation of Jewish-owned cultural goods in German-occupied northeastern Italy between 1943 and 1945, leading for instance to the aforementioned Brunner restitution case.¹⁷⁵

More recently, several initiatives and projects – including conferences, online lectures as well as teaching seminars at several Italian universities – have been realised by the Italo-German Working Group Italy within the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V., present in Italy since spring 2023.¹⁷⁶ The following activities are worth noting:

¹⁷² See L. Gallo/R. Morselli, *Arte Liberata. Capolavori salvati dalla guerra 1937–1947* (Milan: Electa, 2023). For a critical analysis of the exhibition see the Conclusion in this report.

¹⁷³ See B. Gaudenzi, “Cultura materiale e memorie del colonialismo italiano dal secondo dopoguerra a oggi”, in *Quellen und Forschungen aus den Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 104 (2024), pp. 2-14.

¹⁷⁴ <https://www.transcultaa.eu/project-description/> (last accessed on 17 December 2025).

¹⁷⁵ See the comprehensive publication by Fuhrmeister and Murovec (eds.), *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century*.

¹⁷⁶ “Working group of the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V. – New initiative for provenance research on cultural property in Italy”, 10 April 2024, <https://retour.hypotheses.org/3117> (last accessed on 17 December 2025).

- Since 2023, the Italo-German Working Group has been organising annual conferences on relevant topics of Italy-specific provenance research: The first took place at the Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani in Venice,¹⁷⁷ the second at the Biblioteca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institute for Art History in Rome in September 2024,¹⁷⁸ and the third at the Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institute in Florence in November 2025.¹⁷⁹
- Since 2025 the Italo-German Working Group has realised annual online lecture series, hosting each year three scholars to present recent research on studies of collecting, art market and provenance in Italy.¹⁸⁰
- In January 2026, on occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Italo-German Working Group Italy hosted a webinar on the seizure of Jewish-owned cultural goods in Italy in collaboration with the ICOM Italy Working Group “Provenienza”.¹⁸¹
- Current and past research projects by some of its members investigate topics related to the dispossessions, translocation and restitution of Jewish-owned cultural goods in Fascist Italy.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ “Provenance Research in Italy”, First kick-off workshop of the Working Group Italy, organised by A. Cazzola and K. Hüls-Valenti. The proceedings have been published in a special edition of the *Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart*, no. 79, 1 (2025).

¹⁷⁸ “Quo vadis Provenance Research? Primary Sources and Archival Collections in Post-Unitarian Italy”, Second annual meeting of the Working Group Italy (Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V.), organised by T. Bartsch, A. Cazzola, K. Hüls-Valenti, J. Röhl and M. Schneider, 26-27 September 2024, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte, <https://www.biblherz.it/3542817/quo-vadis-provenance-research-primary-sources-and-archival-collections-in-post-unitarian-italy> (last accessed on 17 December 2025). The conference proceedings have just recently been published: A. Cazzola, K. Hüls-Valenti and M. Schneider, *Tracing Provenance in Italy. Navigating through Post-Unitarian Primary Sources and Archival Collections* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026).

¹⁷⁹ “Florentine Provenances. The Circulation of Cultural Assets in Florence, 20th – 21st Centuries“, Third Workshop of the Working Group Italy (Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V.), organised by A. Cazzola and B. Gaudenzi, 10-11 November 2025, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, <https://www.khi.fi.it/it/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/2025/11/florentine-provenances.php> (last accessed on 17 December 2025). The proceedings are expected to be published in 2027.

¹⁸⁰ See <https://arthist.net/archive/44130> (last accessed on 17 December 2025).

¹⁸¹ See <https://www.icom-italia.org/webinar-la-ricerca-sulla-provenienza-nellambito-dellera-nazista-e-fascista-a-cura-del-gdl-provenienza-28-gennaio-2026/> (last accessed on 13 January 2026).

¹⁸² In this regard it is worth mentioning the four-year project “The Restitution of Looted Cultural Property in the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy and Austria, 1945-1998” carried out by Bianca Gaudenzi between 2018 and 2022 and financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG); the Ph.D. project by Katharina Hüls-Valenti on National Socialist art acquisitions in Italy between 1938 and 1945, concluded in 2023 at the University of Mainz and expected to be published in October 2026; and the ongoing Ph.D. project by Madeleine Schneider on the transfer of art and cultural assets from Fascist Italy to the German Reich and Switzerland (1936-1945), expected to be submitted at the LMU Munich in the second half of 2026. For further details see op. cit. by B. Gaudenzi, K. Hüls-Valenti and M. Schneider in the previous chapters, as well as: K. Hüls-Valenti, “Le nuove Best Practices mettono a fuoco la rilevanza storica dell’Italia, in: *La restituzione nel mondo contemporaneo*, ed. by M. Cenini (et. al.) (Napels: Edizione Scientifiche Italiane 2025), pp. 421-432; A. Cazzola and K. Hüls-Valenti, *Provenienzforschung in Italien. Raub, Handel, Transfer* (special issue of the *Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart*), vol. 79, 1 (2025); B. Gaudenzi, *Il peso delle cose. Razzie e restituzioni di beni ebraici a Firenze, 1938-1962* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2027); K. Hüls-Valenti, *Nationalsozialistische Kunsterwerbungen in Italien. Akteure und Strategien (1938-1945)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026).

- Seminars and courses have been held by members of the Italo-German Working Group both abroad and in Italy, at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice, IMT School of Advanced Studies Lucca, the University of Parma, the University of Florence, the Catholic University of Milan, the University of Naples Federico II and the University of Udine, thanks to which new research projects and dissertations are currently underway.

The positive response that these initiatives have received from students and in general from the host institutions, signals a notable interest and willingness to further engage with the topic. Considering recent developments in countries as Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, where provenance research has been recognised as an academic discipline, with dedicated professorships and university curricula, it is thus hoped that these activities will pave the way for a similar recognition of provenance research in Italy's academia (and beyond), becoming an integral part of art history as well as of Holocaust studies.¹⁸³

The Establishment of a Working Group within the Ministry of Culture in 2020

On the institutional level an effort was finally made by the Ministry of Culture in 2020 with the establishment of a Working Group tasked with the study and research of cultural property looted or confiscated from Jewish citizens on Italian soil as a result of the Racial Laws between 1938 and 1945.¹⁸⁴ The interdisciplinary group seeks to carry out activities of recognition, research and identification of cultural assets looted from Jewish citizens or Jewish communities during the racial persecution in Italy. It reports directly to the Ministry of Culture's Commission for the Recovery and Restitution of Cultural Heritage, to which it has an advisory role. In September 2022, the Working Group held a mandatory seminar for all employees of the Ministry of Culture, bringing attention to the topic by presenting their first results.¹⁸⁵ Despite its solely advisory role and the lack of any funding or

¹⁸³ Dedicated Professorships have been installed at the University of Bonn, the Leuphana University of Lüneburg and the Technical University of Berlin; respectively BA and/or MA degrees are being taught at these universities, as well as at the University of Amsterdam, Nanterre University in Paris and the University of Zürich (among others). Advanced training courses are being offered on a regular basis by both public and private entities, for instance the Free University of Berlin, the University of Denver and École du Louvre.

¹⁸⁴ Gruppo di lavoro per lo studio e la ricerca sui beni culturali sottratti in Italia agli ebrei tra il 1938 e il 1945 a seguito della promulgazione delle leggi razziali, established with Ministerial Decree no. 323 of 17 July 2020 as a subsection of the Comitato per il recupero e restituzione dei beni culturali, Italian Ministry of Culture, see <https://cultura.gov.it/comunicato/al-mibac-un-gruppo-di-lavoro-per-recuperare-i-beni-culturali-sottratti-alle-comunita-ebraiche-durante-il-fascismo> (last accessed on 13 December 2025).

¹⁸⁵ "Opere da ritrovare: i beni culturali ebrei in Italia", Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, 16 September 2022, programme and streaming: <https://www.fondazione scuolapatrimonio.it/evento/seminario-opere-da-ritrovare/> (last accessed on 17 December 2025).

researchers, since 2020 the Working Group has endeavoured to facilitate the return of a few artworks, for instance the Roman libraries' books.¹⁸⁶

In addition to this and as part of the overall objectives of the above Working Group, in 2023 the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) has signed an agreement protocol with the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Carabinieri TPC).¹⁸⁷ The agreement fosters a closer collaboration between the Jewish communities and the Carabinieri, aiming to raise public awareness of the historic Jewish heritage as well as to promote the safeguarding of Jewish cultural heritage, thereby hoping to prevent potential thefts and illicit traffic of religious objects. That said, the Working Group's solely advisory capacity and current practical impediments have so far significantly hampered its progress, given that no kind of funding or personnel have been provided by the Ministry to sustain its activities.

5.2 Recent Restitutions

Since 2010, a handful of restitution cases have taken place in Italy. While the aforementioned restitution of the "Santa Caterina d'Alessandria" by Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644) to the Loeser family and the 2012 restitution of the "Cristo Portacroce" by Romanino (1485-1566) to the Gentili de Giuseppe heirs were concluded only after lengthy court proceedings,¹⁸⁸ in recent years the following three restitutions that involved public Italian institutions were resolved extrajudicially, reaching "just and fair solutions" in the spirit of the Washington Principles.

1. *"Madonna and Child with Young St. John and Two Angels", Jacopo del Sellaio (1441-1493)*

In 2018, the Castello di Rivoli – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin reached a "just and fair solution" with the heirs of Czech-born art collector Gustav Arens (1867-1936), whose daughter, Ann Arens Unger (1897-1994), had been forced to flee Austria due to antisemitic persecution, and consequently lost the family's entire collection due to seizure by the Nazis in 1942.¹⁸⁹ Among these

¹⁸⁶ For a summary of the Group's activities see Alessandra Barbuto's and Micaela Procaccia's interventions at the annual provenance webinar of the 2026 Day of Remembrance organised by ICOM Italia and the Working Group Italy within the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V., available at: <https://www.icom-italia.org/webinar-la-ricerca-sulla-provenienza-nellambito-dellera-nazista-e-fascista-a-cura-del-gdl-provenienza-28-gennaio-2026/> (last accessed on 13 January 2026).

¹⁸⁷ See <https://cultura.gov.it/comunicato/25240> (last accessed on 17 December 2025).

¹⁸⁸ The case of the Romanino has been analysed by T. Scovazzi, "Analisi e significato della pratica italiana", in *La restituzione dei beni culturali rimossi con particolare riguardo alla pratica italiana*, ed. by T. Scovazzi (Milan: Giuffrè, 2014), p. 141. The fate of the Gentili collection will be discussed in the next chapter in relation to a pending claim.

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.castellodirivoli.org/comunicato/caso-del-dipinto-del-rinascimento-italiano-saccheggiato-dai-nazisti-trova-risoluzione-nella-collezione-cerruti-al-castello-rivoli/> (last accessed on 23 December 2025).

was the painting “Madonna and Child with Young St. John and Two Angels” by Jacopo del Sellaio (1441-1493), that remained missing for decades after the war, reappearing on the art market first in 1974, at the Galerie Fischer in Lucerne, and then again in 1985 at Christie’s London, where it was bought by an Italian antiquarian. In 1987, the painting was acquired by Turin industrialist and art collector Francesco Federico Cerruti (1922-2015), who then bequeathed it, as part of his art collection, to the Castello di Rivoli after his death in 2015. Upon donation, the Turin museum employed a team to research the provenances of the Cerruti collection and detected the problematic provenance. Following a collaboration between the Turin museum, the Cerruti Foundation and the Holocaust Claims Processing Office (HCPO), the rightful owners of the painting were identified and an agreement was reached that – according to the former museum’s director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev – was both “equitable”, because it included a monetary compensation, and “amicable” because the museum wished to continue exhibiting the artwork and therefore had a copy created for the heirs and kept the original on display, honouring its art historical value as well as its tragic ownership history.¹⁹⁰

2. “Saint Mary Magdalene”, in the manner of Andrea della Robbia (1435-1525)

In 2020 the Uffizi in Florence restituted the white plaster statue “Saint Mary Magdalene” that had once belonged to the Munich art dealer Aron Siegfried Drey (1859-1936), whose business had been forcibly shut down in 1935 due to his Jewish origins.¹⁹¹ Following the liquidation by the German authorities, the remaining stock was auctioned off on 17 and 18 June 1936 by the Berlin-based auction house Paul Graupe, including said statue as lot 104.¹⁹² The artwork then reappeared in 1941 in Florence, where count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi (1878–1955) offered the piece to Hermann Göring’s art agent Walter Andreas Hofer (1893–1975). It remains unclear whether Contini Bonacossi himself acquired the statue at the forced 1936 auction or whether it was bought by someone else and only subsequently passed on to Contini Bonacossi. Sale records connected to Göring’s art collection, however, clearly state that the statue was bought for the Reich Marshall in May 1941 for 400,000 lire, and thereafter shipped to Germany.¹⁹³ After the war, the “Saint Mary Magdalene” was found among

¹⁹⁰ See M. Durón, “High-Profile Italian Collection Resolves Restitution Dispute Involving Nazi-looted Renaissance Painting”, in *ARTnews*, 29 July 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/cerruti-collection-unger-restitution-jacopo-del-sellaio-1202695619/> (last accessed on 22 December 2025).

¹⁹¹ On A.S. Drey see S. Schulze/S. Reuter (eds.): *Raubkunst? Provenienzforschung zu den Sammlungen des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg* (Hamburg: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 2014), pp. 66-69.

¹⁹² Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, *Aus dem Besitz der Firma A.S. Drey München (Räumungsverkauf)*, Paul Graupe, auct. cat., Berlin, 17.-18. Juni 1936, Los 104, Tafel 30, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.5694> (last accessed on 22 December 2025).

¹⁹³ Paris, Archives Nationales (AN), Aj/40/1683, Achats de Göring en Italie 1940-42, confirmation letter to Contini Bonacossi, 29 May 1941.

Göring's art collection by the Allies and inventoried at the Central Collecting Point in Munich. Considering the 1941 transaction between Contini Bonacossi and Göring, but not being aware of the A.S. Drey provenance, i.e. the forced sale of 1936, the statue was restituted to Italy in 1954 and, in compliance with law no. 77 of 1950, declared national patrimony and assigned to the Uffizi by Ministerial decree of 1 August 1988.¹⁹⁴ Only when the legal representatives of the A.S. Drey heirs reached out to the Uffizi to verify the presence of the artwork was the entire provenance chain reconstructed and an amicable agreement reached between the Italian Cultural Ministry and the German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.¹⁹⁵ The principal challenge that came with the physical restitution of the artwork was, however, the removal of the artwork from the register of non-transferable state property by special decree.¹⁹⁶ This complex legal process followed, for the first time, the Washington Principles.¹⁹⁷ Whilst the "Saint Mary Magdalene" was thus returned to Germany to its legitimate heir, only one year earlier the German Government reciprocally had restituted the painting "Flower Vases" by Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) to the Uffizi, from whose collections it had disappeared during the Second World War, in 1944, when a German soldier looted it from one of the deposits in South Tyrol.¹⁹⁸

3. *Four paintings from the collection of Filippo Brunner*

In 2023, the Civic Museum of Udine restituted the paintings "Flute Player" by Antonio Lonza, "View of Jerusalem", by Bernhard Fiedler, "The Herd of Deer in the Forest", by Johann Christian Kröner, and "Forest Trail", by Anton Windmaier, to the heir of Filippo Brunner. As discussed in Chapter 1, the paintings had been assigned to the museum by the German commissioner Frodl after their confiscation in 1944, and remained there unclaimed for nearly eighty years, until their discovery in the museum deposits by a young scholar.¹⁹⁹ Subsequent to the restitution, the Brunner heir donated the artworks to the museum, under the condition that they would be displayed as testimonies of the

¹⁹⁴ Law no. 77 of 14 January 1950, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 20 March 1950, no. 66; DM of 1 August 1988.

¹⁹⁵ German Federal Art Administration, *Bund übergibt NS-Raubkunst an Erben*, Press release, 5 June 2020: https://kunstverwaltung.bund.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/PM_03_2020.html (last accessed on 8 November 2025).

¹⁹⁶ Decreto del Direttore Generale Archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio n. 840 of 30 July 2019, 'Passaggio dal demanio al patrimonio dello Stato della scultura attribuita ad Andrea Della Robbia e raffigurante Maria Maddalena', https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2019-12-20&atto.codiceRedazionale=19A07949&elenco30giorni=false (last accessed on 23 December 2025).

¹⁹⁷ A. Barbuto/M. Procaccia, "Reparing Historical Injustice. Provenance research on the seizure of Jewish-owned cultural heritage in Italy between 1938 and 1945", in: *Tracing Provenance in Italy. Navigating through Post-Unitarian Primary Sources and Archival Resources*, pp. 185-197.

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.uffizi.it/news/quadro-trafugato-soldati-tedeschi-torna-agli-uffizi> (last accessed on 20 December 2025).

¹⁹⁹ See pages 22 and 44 in this report.

antisemitic persecution their former owner had suffered under the Nazi occupation of the Alpe Adria region.

While in comparison to the previous decades this handful of restitutions generally signals an increase, the number is still significantly lower than in many other European countries, with each case underscoring paradigmatically the complex historical context and multilayered challenges that Italy has not yet fully addressed.

5.3 Pending Restitutions

The persisting lack of provenance research in Italian collections makes it currently impossible to estimate the scale of pending restitutions. Still, several cases were addressed during a public symposium held in Venice in 2022 that illustrated paradigmatically the reluctance on part of Italian public collections to engage constructively with claimants. This concerns specifically the following three paintings, where attempts to find “just and fair solutions” have failed over the past twenty years due the unresponsiveness of the institutions and/or their affirmed position that they acquired the paintings in good faith, and are therefore not obliged to return them:

1. “Portrait of Federigo Martinengo” by Alessandro Moretto (1498-1554), once owned by the Viennese art collector Julius Priester (1870-1955), from whom it was confiscated in 1938 and subsequently sold to Dr. Roberto Bassi-Rathgeb, who then donated it to the Museo Villa Bassi Rathgeb in Abano Terme in 1972.
2. “Madonna with Child” by Bernardo Zenale (1460-1526), like the aforementioned “Cristo Portacroce” by Romanino currently in possession of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, since its acquisition by the Italian Cultural Ministry in the 1970s, but claimed by the heirs of Federico Gentili di Giuseppe (1869-1940), whose entire art collection was confiscated by the Vichy government in Paris and sold at auction at Hôtel Drouot in April 1941.
3. “Annunciation” by Vincenzo Foppa (1430-1515), currently at the Museo Civico di Crema e del Cremasco, but with the same provenance history as the artwork above, thus claimed by the Gentili di Giuseppe heirs. This case is particularly paradoxical as it was acquired by the civic administration of Crema and with the support of the regional superintendency in 2022, together with other 61 artworks from the Stramezzi Collection, apparently completely in

ignorance of its problematic provenance, although the Gentili de Giuseppe case was by then broadly known to the public.

At the same conference scholars presented other artworks that are currently in Italian private and public collections and where repeated attempts to recover the items have until now equally failed due to the unwillingness of the institutions to communicate with the heirs of the former owners.²⁰⁰ It is not clear whether there has been any development on these cases. Only with regard to the painting “Ritratto del Signor Arnaud a cavallo” by French painter Edouard Manet (1832-1883), held at the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Milan, it is known that following the conference a dialogue was initiated between the museum and legal representatives of the heirs of German Jewish painter Max Liebermann (1847-1935), to whom it belonged until its forced sale in 1936 in Berlin. This led to an update of the museum’s provenance information regarding the painting.²⁰¹

Aside from these known claims, which concern artworks that were unlawfully appropriated outside of Italy, either in Germany or in Nazi-occupied countries and entered Italian collections only after the war, it should be highlighted that research on cultural goods that were looted from Jewish individuals on Italian soil either by Fascist or Nazi authorities is still at such embryonic stage that it is difficult to establish with certainty how many of the confiscated objects were returned to their rightful owners in the postwar era and how many are actually still dispersed or held by Italian institutions. An attempt to document the missing items that were taken by the Nazis – conveniently ignoring the confiscations executed by the Fascists – was made by the Italian Cultural Ministry in 1996 with the publication *Treasures Untraced. An Inventory of the Italian Art Treasures Lost during the Second World War*, which counted approximately 1,000 dispersed objects, not including, however, bibliographical material and archival documents.²⁰²

As stated in Chapter 2, in some cases postwar restitution in Italy was rather straightforward, in others instead it was obstructed by complex bureaucracy and unwillingness, if not to say lingering antisemitism. The possibility of restitution naturally also differed considerably depending on whether the looted objects were in state or private hands (which is still today the case, not only in Italy). Following the publication of the Anselmi report, opinions thus differed on how much of what was

²⁰⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KVTbhovTgA&t=6s> (starting from 5:28:34).

²⁰¹ <https://www.gam-milano.com/percorsi/collezioni/focus1/ritratto-di-michel-arnaud-a-cavallo> (last accessed on 17 September 2026).

²⁰² L. Morozzi and R. Paris, *Treasures Untraced. An Inventory of the Italian Art Treasures Lost during the Second World War* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1995).

taken had been returned.²⁰³ In light of the herein discussed cases, it stands to reason that more objects with Italian-Jewish provenances could come to light at Italian cultural institutions if provenance checks would be conducted systematically on their collections, as recommended by the Best Practices.

In regard to cultural property stolen from Jewish communities, primary consideration should be given to the libraries of the Roman Jewish community, looted by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) in autumn 1943, that despite multiple years of research efforts of the Tedeschi commission are still dispersed.²⁰⁴ The same counts for various religious objects and furniture pillaged from other Italian synagogues, as discussed in the previous chapters. A noteworthy project in this regard is “Judaica Alpe Adria. Traces of Jewish Memories. Synagogues and Judaica in the Julian March during the 20th Century”, led by Donata Levi and Daria Brasca, that attempts to assess and document the destruction and comprehensive looting of Jewish synagogues and their ritual objects in the Adria region, i.e. in Trieste, Rijeka, Gorizia and Opatija.²⁰⁵

This context also necessitates mentioning recent research into the antisemitic persecution under Italian occupation in the eastern Adriatic coast, i.e. former Yugoslavia, where expropriation processes and looting of Jewish-owned cultural goods have not yet been fully investigated (the same accounts for Greece). Several contributions in the aforementioned volume *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century* shed light on the looting and translocation of Jewish-owned cultural goods in Slovenia and Croatia, both by Fascists and Nazis.²⁰⁶ Given the territorial adjustments in that region prior to and after the Second World War, some cases involve former Italian citizens as well as cultural assets that according to the legislation at that time were considered Italian cultural heritage. A telling example is the painting “Entombment of Christ” by Palma il Giovane (1548-1628), the complex provenance history of which was recently reconstructed by Micaela Procaccia and Gino Famiglietti.²⁰⁷ The painting, which once belonged to the Jewish dealer Edoardo Pollak (born 1876 in Fiume), was seized by the Nazis in 1944 from the Bishop of Fiume, to whom Pollak had attempted to sell the painting shortly before his arrest and deportation. Given that it was registered as national heritage in compliance with the so-called Legge Rosadi of 20 June 1909, Italian authorities insisted that the seized

²⁰³ See Gaudenzi, “Cultural Restitution and the ‘Rediscovery’ of the Holocaust in Italy”, p. 392.

²⁰⁴ See Commissione Tedeschi, *Rapporto finale*.

²⁰⁵ <https://judaica.dolmenweb.net/en/1/traces-of-jewish-memories> (last accessed on 29 December 2025).

²⁰⁶ See contributions by L. Dulibic and I. Pasini Trzec, I. Ferencak, E. Franchi in *Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century*.

²⁰⁷ See G. Famiglietti and M. Procaccia, *Un uomo, un quadro. Edoardo Pollak e la Deposizione nel sepolcro* (Rome: Scienze e Lettere, 2025).

painting could not be confiscated by the Nazis and should remain in Fiume at the disposal of the Bishop. Due to the annexation of Fiume to the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in the postwar period, the painting was eventually moved to Zagreb, where it is currently held at the Strossmayer Gallery.²⁰⁸

Lastly, open questions persist in relation to the looting of Jewish-owned cultural goods in former Italian colonies, i.e. Libya and Ethiopia, as well as in countries annexed by Italy during the war, i.e. Albania, parts of Slovenia and the Italian Aegean islands.²⁰⁹ Considering the recent development of provenance research on colonial objects in Italian cultural institutions, thematically overlapping cases may come to light.

5.4 Nazi and Fascist-Era Provenance Research in Practice

Given that during the Nazi and Fascist era thousands of objects were confiscated, looted or sold under duress or below value and that these objects after the war continued to circulate on the international art market, it seems unlikely that Italian cultural institutions – private or public – would not have become inadvertently in possession of them. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that they would not presently circulate on the Italian art market, as they do regularly resurface on the international market. Notwithstanding this, it appears that neither most Italian cultural institutions nor the national art market are generally aware of the issue, nor has the Italian government sufficiently addressed the topic, by introducing specific legal instruments and providing financial resources to implement provenance research in public institutions.

State of Affairs in Italian Cultural Institutions

The above case studies have shown paradigmatically that in the past years artworks with problematic provenances have been identified in several Italian cultural institutions – both private and public – which entered the collections either through acquisitions, bequests, donations or, in the case of the Brunner paintings, by direct involvement in dispossession processes during the Fascist period. While a few institutions involved in the above cases have shown themselves to be collaborative, thus producing a positive outcome (including positive media coverage), others refused to engage and

²⁰⁸ The ministerial Working Group is currently revising this case to clarify the legal circumstances of the ownership transfers, see A. Barbuto/M. Procaccia, “Reparing Historical Injustice”.

²⁰⁹ See Sarfatti, *I confini di una persecuzione. Il fascismo e gli ebrei fuori d'Italia (1938-1943)*, pp. 21-49.

therefore faced legal disputes. This reluctance to comply with the Washington Principles was also raised at the 2022 conference in Venice by Anne Webber, Co-Chair of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, who stated that several Italian museums had not been willing even to engage with claimants or their legal representatives to initiate procedures of “just and fair solutions”.²¹⁰

As established by the newly adopted ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, acquisition practices, be it through ‘purchase, gift, loan, bequest, or exchange’, should come with a thorough effort to ensure ‘that all objects are obtained in compliance with applicable laws regulating the ownership’, and ‘Museums should exercise due diligence in establishing an object’s origin and complete history.’²¹¹ Furthermore, the new Code of Ethics includes a specific paragraph regarding restitution, stating that Museums ‘should promptly and transparently respond to requests for restitution and return’, and ‘should be prepared to constructively engage with the requesting party [...] and be open to dialogue about restitution and return.’ Lastly, the Code strongly encourages museums to ‘conduct provenance research on all the collections they hold’.²¹² Aside from Italy’s commitment to the Washington Principles and the recent Best Practices, solely on the basis of the above Code of Ethics Italian cultural institutions are thus required to carefully conduct provenance research both upon acquisition of an object as well as concerning those objects already in their permanent collections.

Only recently has a case become publicly known in which a non-profit biomedical research institute in Milan, following the donation of a painting by Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), commissioned an independent provenance researcher to assess whether the work had been confiscated or sold under duress during Italy’s Fascist racial persecution.²¹³ The inquiry was prompted by the presence of a potentially problematic surname in the artwork’s provenance, namely that of a Jewish owner from Turin, who had owned the painting in 1917 and was later subjected to persecution and wartime concealment during the Fascist period. Drawing on archival sources and family testimony, the investigation ultimately reconstructed the painting’s continuous chain of ownership, from its acquisition in 1917 to its voluntary sale in 1961, thereby eliminating any lacunae or grounds for

²¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KVTbhovTgA> (5:18:50).

²¹¹ ICOM Code of ETHICS for Museums, 2026, C.4. “Museums should adhere to professional acquisition and accessioning practices“, p. 22, <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-revised-icom-code-of-ethics-is-officially-adopted/> (last accessed on 17 September 2026).

²¹² Ibid, C.10., “Museums should actively respond to requests for restitution and return and, when appropriate, pursue voluntary return“, p. 25.

²¹³ For a detailed analysis of the case see S. Hecker, “The Provenance of Umberto Boccioni’s *Maestra di scena* [La Signora Maffi] (1909): An Archival Reconstruction“, in *Transfer. Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection*, 5 (2026).

suspicion in the provenance. Consequently, in accordance with the donor's expressed wishes, the institute was able to sell the artwork to an Italian museum, with the proceeds allocated to the support of scientific research.

However, aside from the herein discussed cases, at the current stage neither private nor public museums in Italy generally conduct systematic research on Nazi and Fascist-era provenance, nor do they provide comprehensive provenance information in their exhibitions.

Provenance and Due Diligence on the Italian Art Market

Turning to the Italian art market, the situation is possibly even worse, given that the vast majority of neither Italian auction houses nor art dealers generally employ provenance researchers to verify the ownership histories of cultural goods they offer for sale. While major international auction houses by now have dedicated departments for provenance research and restitution, no Italian auction house is known to have such a department (only few of them do occasional verify with the Art Loss Register). This general lack of diligence and attention towards complete provenance chains is also reflected in auction catalogues (digital and print), where information on provenance is either sporadic or completely absent. Quite telling is, for instance, the recent intervention of the aforementioned Working Group of the Italian Ministry of Culture, together with the Carabinieri TPC, at a Florentine auction house, where two looted artworks by Italian painter Vincenzo Damini (dating to 1751) had been offered for auction, and were seized just in time after the Working Group was alerted by the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, which represented the heirs of the paintings' rightful owner, Jewish-born art collector Dr. Alfons Jaffé (1861-1949) of Berlin.²¹⁴

Analogue shortcomings persist regarding Italian art dealers. For instance, at a recent art fair held by the Italian Antiquarians Association (Associazione Antiquari d'Italia) in Rome, only a few of the approximately 70 exhibition booths provided comprehensive provenance information, some of which, however, consisted of alarming gaps in the period between 1933 and 1945, or included references to what are internationally known as "red flag names", without any further clarification.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ For further information on the Jaffé collection and its seizure by the Dienststelle Mühlmann in 1941 see: <https://www.ndr.de/kultur/kunst/provenienzforschung/Der-Fall-Alfons-Jaffe-Ein-Gemaelde-kehrt-zurueck,museumsdetektive104.html> (last accessed on 11 June 2026). For details on the seized paintings and subsequent restitution see <https://vimeo.com/event/4469488> (starting at 7:34:00, last accessed on 12 May 2026).

²¹⁵ The Red Flag Names List by the Art Looting Intelligence Unit (ALIU) can be visualised online: <https://www.lootedart.com/MVI3RM469661> (last accessed on 16 September 2026).

It is perplexing that the Italian art market has not yet adopted the practice of thoroughly researching and providing artwork provenances with regard to the Nazi and Fascist era, given that the international art market is now far more insistent on transparent provenances than before – acknowledging that this process not only fulfils due diligence but also increases an artwork's value. The increased sensitivity of international dealers goes hand in hand with the recent strong commitment of international auction houses and is not the least a result of the public attention that the topic of Nazi-looted art has been receiving in press and media over the past years, covering nearly on a daily basis either successful or still pending restitutions. Dealer's associations in several countries have, thus, established codes of conduct that mainly follow the Washington Principles and the Best Practices, and regularly promote informative events to educate and advise on the topic.²¹⁶ To date, similar initiatives in Italy are still a *desideratum*. It can be noted, however, that the overall topic of stolen cultural goods and illicit trafficking is in general widely discussed within the Italian art sector, usually in reference to the 1995 Unidroit Convention on Stolen and or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.²¹⁷ However, these issues appear to be primarily related to antiquities and cultural property stolen or alienated from Italian soil through illicit excavations and trade, rather than to looting and unlawful transfers of ownership during historical contexts of injustice.

The Legal Perspective

Over the past years the legal sector has increasingly turned its attention to the topic of Nazi and Fascist looted art, largely thanks to the strong discipline of Art Law in Italy. For instance, in 2021 Professor of Law, Arianna Visconti, from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore organised a conference at the Memorial of the Shoah in Milan, entitled “‘Questo é stato’: arte, memoria, riparazione”.²¹⁸ Since then, she continues to publish and hold symposiums on the general topic of restitution and repatriation, in particular on occasion of the annual International Provenance Research Day.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ See for instance the British Antiquities Dealer's Association (<https://theada.co.uk/>) or the activities of the working group Kunsthandel of the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V. (<https://www.arbeitskreis-provenienzforschung.org/arbeitsgruppen/ag-kunsthandel/>), both last accessed on 24 December 2025).

²¹⁷ <https://www.unidroit.org/instruments/cultural-property/1995-convention/> (last accessed on 24 December 2025).

²¹⁸ <https://secondotempo.cattolicanews.it/webreportage-questo-e-stato-in-cerca-di-giustizia-per-l-arte-rubata-dai-nazisti-agli-ebrei> (last accessed on 18 September 2026).

²¹⁹ The seminar in 2025 was entitled “Provenance Research and International Justice: Objectives, Methods and Challenges”, see <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/fare-ricerca-oggetti-sottratti-nazisti-e-coltivare-memoria-AGMneWaD> (last accessed on 26 December 2025); in 2026 she organised a panel discussion on “Provenance Research and Due Diligence in the Art and Antiquities World: Distinctions, Connections, Synergies, Challenges”. On Visconti's

In 2025, on occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2025 the Università Ca' Foscari in Venice dedicated its annual "Memory, Law and Rights" Conference to the topic of restitution of Nazi-confiscated art with a particular focus on Italy,²²⁰ Later that year a volume was published in the legal studies series Comparative Art Law/Diritto Comparato dell'Arte, directed by Alessandra Donati of the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, that gathers contributions from two past conferences, that were held in Italy on topics of illicit trafficking, looting and restitution of cultural goods.²²¹ The volume was presented on 9 December 2025 at the main court house in Milan and recently discussed in the *Giornale dell'Arte* by Professor of Law Laura Castelli.²²²

In these contexts, scholars have pinpointed that, in comparison to other European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, Italy has so far not adopted sufficient laws to facilitate restitution of cultural goods unlawfully expropriated during the period of 1933 to 1945, nor has it established an independent commission entrusted with the ability of finding just and fair solutions. Given the strict Italian cultural property laws, which currently impede restitutions, rather than facilitating them, it is necessary to introduce a specific legislative framework that allows public institutions to deaccession and return cultural goods to the heirs of former owners, as well as to establish a dedicated restitution body that has research funds and legal instruments at its disposal to address and resolve claims. Considering the noteworthy developments in neighbouring European countries over the past two decades, and particularly in light of Italy's active role in the antisemitic persecution, it is astonishing that since the presentation of the Anselmi Commission in 2001 and the 1997 law (see Chapter 3), there has been no legislative initiative or significant progress on the part of the Italian government that would indicate an active commitment to the Washington Principles.

Just recently these considerations were consolidated in a report, commissioned by the Claims Conference and the WJRO, under the patronage of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), and written by Lorenzo Casini, Professor of Law and director of the IMT School of Advanced Studies

publications see among others A. Visconti, "Legislazione e prassi italiane in materia di beni culturali tra protezionismo e universalismo. Questioni aperte in materia di restituzione di oggetti sottratti nel periodo coloniale", in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 104 (2024), pp. 34-54.

²²⁰ See <https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/1/96073> (last accessed on 26 December 2025).

²²¹ See Cenini (et. al.), *La restituzione dei beni culturali nel mondo contemporaneo*.

²²² See <https://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/Articolo/Lattualita-del-problema-delle-restituzioni> (last accessed on 18 September 2026).

Lucca.²²³ The report examines Italy's past and current legal framework concerning the restitution of artworks looted during the Nazi and Fascist periods, and elaborates through a comparative analysis a proposal of an adequate legal framework.

Following the publication of this report a group of Italian politicians, led by Federico Mollicone, presented bill AC 2834 that proposes the introduction of a new law to facilitate restitution of works of art taken for reasons of racial persecution in the period 1933-1945, currently held in Italian public collections.²²⁴ The bill proposal was discussed by external experts in an informal hearing of 24 June 2026 and should soon be presented to the Italian Chamber of Deputies.²²⁵

²²³ https://www.lootedart.com/web_images/pdf2026/IMT_Report_Rapporto-ENGLISH.pdf (last accessed on 18 September 2026).

²²⁴ <https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/pdl/pdf/leg.19.pdl.camera.2834.19PDL0186390.pdf> (last accessed on 18 September 2026).

²²⁵ https://www.camera.it/leg19/1104?shadow_organo_parlamentare=3507&id_tipografico=07&annomese=202606 (last accessed on 18 September 2026).

Conclusion

In the winter of 2022-2023, a major exhibition took place at one of Rome's most prestigious venues, the Scuderie del Quirinale, on “Liberated art. Masterpieces salvaged from the war, 1937-1947” – that is, artworks liberated “from the claws of the Nazis”, as reported in the press – in which Fascism was completely erased from Italian history, with the Nazis cast as the sole villains, and the Italian superintendents and, especially, Fascist antisemitic Minister Giuseppe Bottai cast as the ultimate national heroes.

The exhibition provided a detailed account of the far-reaching measures taken to safeguard national heritage from 1937 onwards – as a result of Italy's brutal aggression of Ethiopia and its rapprochement with Nazi Germany. Aware of the devastation caused by the First World War, during which air raids led to the damage or destruction of several monuments and buildings in the north-eastern part of the country – particularly in Venice – the Superintendencies and the Ministry of National Education (then headed by Giuseppe Bottai) implemented a comprehensive plan to classify and secure movable and immovable heritage in anticipation of the new war, declared by Italy in June 1940.

One of Fascism's most powerful albeit critical leaders and an enthusiastic advocate of the colonisation of East Africa and of antisemitic measures, Bottai and some of the other functionaries involved in the regime's most violent activities were portrayed as heroes in the exhibition, on a par with officials who risked their lives to oppose the dictatorship, racial persecution and Nazi occupation. One example is the glorification of figures such as the aforementioned superintendent Vittorio Moschini, who went to great lengths to seize artistic treasures owned by Venetian Jewish families, whom the exhibition celebrated in the same league as individuals of the calibre of the aforementioned Giorgio Castelfranco, former director of the Palazzo Pitti Gallery and one of the key personalities of the postwar restitution process, or Fernanda Wittgens, director of the Pinacoteca di Brera, who in 1944 was imprisoned as an “enemy of Fascism” after helping Jewish friends and acquaintances flee the country.²²⁶

Art – as people – were indeed liberated, but by whom and, above all, why? The exhibition's narrative made no mention of why Italy was at war, or what it was supposed to be liberated from, other than the Germans – whom the exhibition portrayed as invaders appearing out of nowhere, rather than as

²²⁶ See Gaudenzi, “Cultura materiale e memorie del colonialismo italiano dal secondo dopoguerra a oggi”, pp. 3-5.

former allies of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. The exhibition included no mention of Fascism, anti-Fascism, the suppression of political and civil liberties, racial persecution, or the regime's warmongering, only of the supposedly "good" Italians against the "bad" Germans – bringing the process of erasure of Fascist crimes that had begun in the 1950s to its ultimate consequences. A ahistorical "liberation" without Fascism or the Resistance, in which Italian history has been purged of the crimes perpetrated during the Fascist dictatorship and its wars, creating the false image of a country that just so happened to be at war, through no fault of its own, and was populated by accidental heroes – identified only as Italians, instead of anti-Fascist partisans.

The exhibition's narrow national focus was also indicative of the at least partial interpretation it purveyed, all the more curious since the show took 1937 – the year following the proclamation of the Fascist empire and of the colonial racial laws – as its starting point. Quite tellingly, the issue of the confiscation of Jewish-owned cultural property – which Bottai had been advocating by every means as early as the beginning of 1939 – is represented solely by the albeit central case of the library of the Roman Jewish community, confiscated by the Nazis in the autumn of 1943. While, as we have seen, the looting of the library undoubtedly represents one of the most striking examples of the plundering of cultural heritage across Italy, the fact that it was carried out by a Nazi agency does not in any way undermine the myth of "Italians as good people",²²⁷ nor does it contradict the false impression that the confiscation of Jewish property was carried out solely by the Nazis, when in reality, on Italian territory, it was mostly the Fascist regime and then the Italian Social Republic that deprived Italian and foreign Jews of all their possessions, acting independently and at times even in competition with their Nazi allies.

In her introductory remarks to the 2001 general Report, Tina Anselmi underlined:

The material side of the spoliation of Jewish assets and their restitution is certainly important, but it does not constitute the essential aspect. Before being a question of money, the spoliation took the form of persecution, the final objective of which was moral annihilation and therefore extermination [...] Surely, this is the debt that must be paid [...] In our case this happened as a result of discriminating laws and regulations which violently isolated a chunk of our population only because of their birth.²²⁸

²²⁷ See in particular A. Del Boca, *Italiani brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2005), translated into English as *As Cruel as Anyone Else: Italians, Colonies and Empire* (London: Seagull Books, 2024).

²²⁸ See Commissione Anselmi, *Rapporto generale*, p. 9.

Twenty-five years on, the Commission's recommendations are still awaiting implementation – first and foremost its proposal to establish a permanent Commission with decision-making capabilities, adequate funding and expert researchers.