What motivated artists, art historians, and art dealers to try to link expressionism with Nazism? What mechanisms defined the canonization of expressionism in art history after the Second World War and the return of ideologically charged concepts and patterns of argumentation in the present? This collection of essays explores these questions. The contributions were presented at an international conference that was held in May 2019, a collaboration between the Neue Nationalgalerie and the Freie Universität Berlin organized by Meike Hoffmann and Dieter Scholz. Several essays in this volume also discuss new, innovative exhibition formats, responsibilities, and perspectives: How can the richly diverse and contradictory image of the German art world between 1933 and 1945 be represented in the institutional context of an art museum today?

UNMASTERED PAST?
MODERNISM IN NAZI GERMANY
ART, ART TRADE, CURATORIAL PRACTICE
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This overview of recent, mostly German, research into art and art policy during the Nazi era is a decidedly subjective one, shaped by my own biography as a researcher in the field and by an admittedly selective approach. Under the circumstances, it would therefore be presumptuous to promise completeness or full objectivity.

One particular publication serves as a reference point and as a kind of blueprint for my own review—Überbrückt: Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus, the seminal 1999 overview of German art historians and artists from 1925 to 1937 edited by Eugen Blume and Dieter Scholz. The volume began as a colloquium in Berlin co-organized by the Ferdinand-Moeller-Stiftung and the Nationalgalerie. In eight sections, its twenty-four chapters explored the relationship between modern art and the Nazi state, the roles of art professionals (particularly art historians, art writers and journalists, artists, and art dealers), and the history of exhibitions and museums during the period. Both the conference and the subsequent volume established the parameters of a hitherto little explored field of study. At the same time, Überbrückt highlighted the need for a more nuanced examination of a wealth of subjects, including Nazi art ideology, the roles of various institutions, the behavior of individual protagonists, and the aesthetics of modernism itself. In retrospect, the project was as farsighted as it was provocative.

What have the intervening two decades brought us in terms of research? What have we accomplished? and what remains unmastered? How have institutions developed to address these issues; how has exhibition praxis and research infrastructure changed? (There have been significant developments, for example, in provenance research and digitization in general.) And not least, how have working conditions changed for the researchers themselves? Interdisciplinary discourse, institutional dependency, and political wishful thinking are just some of the cross-currents swirling around scholars as they do their work today.

With these key broad questions in mind, I have organized my considerations into eight sections: 1) “Degenerate Art,” 2) “Nazi Art,” 3) Not Only/but Also (or: The neither/nor), 4) Art Critics and Art Historians, 5) Institutions (Museums and Art Academies), 6) The Art Market, Art Dealers, and Collectors, 7) Provenance Research, and 8) Future Prospects.

1. “DEGENERATE ART”

The year 2003 saw the establishment of the Berlin-based Forschungstelle “Entartete Kunst” in the department of art history at the Freie Universität. (Full disclosure: I was a researcher there during its first three years.) The center’s first director was Uwe Fleckner, who transferred in 2004 to the Universität Hamburg to establish a second research center with a different area of focus. Long-term funding for the Forschungstelle came from the Ferdinand-Moeller-Stiftung until mid-2015, with additional support provided by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung. Then, after six months of stopgap funding by the FU, Germany’s commissioner for culture and the media sponsored the project from 2016–18. After this, the city-state of Berlin supported the center with co-financing from the FU and the Kulturstiftung der Länder. The latter has committed to financing through mid-2021 one student assistant in addition to work contracts to maintain the center’s “Degenerate Art” database. In the meantime, the research center has earned national as well as international recognition thanks to its continuous and ground-breaking scholarly contributions. The team, primarily led by Meike Hoffmann and Andreas Hünke, is under the administrative leadership of Klaus Krüger. Having established itself as the leading center for expertise in matters of “degenerate art,” it is all the more crucial that long-term public funding for the project be secured. One particularly high-profile example of the center’s work involved identifying the trove of art discovered in 2010 during excavations for a new subway line near Berlin’s city hall. The center was able to trace the sculpture and sculptural fragments found near the Rote Rathaus—sixteen pieces in all—to the Nazi campaign to confiscate “degenerate art.” Then, in 2012, when the large trove of artworks was discovered in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, the center again played a leading role from the very start, mainly through Meike Hoffmann’s engagement.
The Forschungstelle continues to fulfill its core task: processing the Nazi inventory of material seized during its notorious “Entartete Kunst” campaign and publishing its findings online. It bases its work on the list that the Nazis themselves compiled at the time of the confiscations. For many years this work had been hindered by the fact that only the first volume of the list was available—covering museums from Aachen to Greifswald—but a breakthrough came in 1997, a year after the widow of art dealer Harry Fischer donated her husband’s papers to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Andrea Hüneke ascertained that these archives contained a copy of the complete Nazi inventory. By the summer of 2018, the Forschungstelle’s database was therefore able to offer a full online listing of the more than twenty-one thousand seized artworks—including the close to five hundred works from the estate of Cornelius Gurlitt that are currently housed in the Kunstmuseum Bern. Today, provenance information in particular is updated continually. I must again stress the critical importance of securing permanent public funding for the Forschungstelle so that this crucial database can be maintained at a high academic level and the center’s professional scholarly work can be continued. Indeed, permanent funding is long overdue.

The Forschungstelle also regularly organizes courses and conferences and supervises doctoral and master’s level theses. Major studies have been published under its aegis within the framework of two different series. The series published by De Gruyter Verlag (initially launched by Akademie Verlag) has issued twelve books to date, including several studies on the art market and individual art dealers in the Nazi years. Meanwhile, two books have thus far appeared in the series published by the Munich-based Wilhelm Fink Verlag: one on Hermann Göring and his agent Josef Angerer and one on “degenerate” architecture. Two more are in preparation: the proceedings of a conference covering “degenerate” art in the cities of Breslau, Stettin, and Königsberg, and a monograph by Andreas Hüneke entitled Kunst am Pranger.

The Forschungstelle at the FU in Berlin has actively taken part in many of the past decade’s exhibitions and accompanying catalogs devoted to “degenerate art.” These include exhibitions at the Städtische Galerie Bremen (2009), at the Kunstmuseum Mülheim (2012), at the Neue Galerie in New York City (2014), at the Kunstmuseum Bern (2016), in the Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf (2017–18), and at the Kunsthalle Mannheim (2019). Also noteworthy was the 2017 publication of Georg Kreis’s Einstehen für “Entartete Kunst” – Die Basler Ankäufe von 1939/40, itself a significantly expanded edition of his 1990 study of the Kunstmuseum Basel’s purchase in 1939–40 of twenty-one works of “degenerate art” confiscated from Berlin museums in addition to the notorious 1939 auction of additional works (at Galerie Fischer) in Lucerne. Comparing these recent exhibitions with the two most comprehensive exhibitions on the subject of “degenerate” art held prior to 1999—one of them curated by Peter-Klaus Schuster in Munich in 1987 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi Entartete Kunst exhibition, the other organized by Stephanie Barron in Los Angeles and Berlin in 1992—makes clear how far research into Nazi art policy has come in the intervening years. In particular, we see a whole new range of questions being asked as well as the fruit of greatly expanded research methods. These shows have given provenance issues much more attention, along with networks of artists, art dealers, and museum professionals, and have been able to draw on deeper pools of knowledge about Nazi art theft more generally.

Another area falling under the general heading of “degenerate art” considers how other countries reacted at the time to the Nazi demonization campaigns. For example, there were “counter exhibitions” organized in London, Paris, and the United States. Lucy Wasensteiner’s groundbreaking work on the 1938 London exhibition Twentieth Century German Art was the topic of her dissertation and appeared as a book in 2019. She was able to partially reconstruct that historic exhibition for a show held in 2018–19 at the Liebermann Villa on the Wannsee in Berlin. Michael Tymkiw’s 2018 study Nazi Exhibition Design and Modernism also deserves attention.

2. “NAZI ART”

What about so-called Nazi art—the art officially supported by the regime and that conformed with it? The Überbrückt colloquium of 1999 gave this subject only marginal attention, but of course it cannot be excluded from any review of recent research on Nazi-era art and art policy. This is the moment for a flashback to 1988. Nazi-Kunst ins Museum? was the title of an anthology edited by Klaus Staeck to document one of the controversial discussions taking place against the broader background of the so-called Historikerstreit. It was mainly sparked by two causes. The first was the restitution by the US government to West Germany of some nine thousand works of Nazi-era visual art that had been seized by the US military immediately after World War II. The German War Art Collection was returned to the Federal Republic of Germany in the spring of 1986.
(and has been housed since 2000 at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin). Another cause was an art commission awarded to Arno Breker—“Hitler’s favorite sculptor”—by the Aachen-based businessman and art patron Peter Ludwig and his wife Irene that same year: a pair of bronze portrait busts. Peter Ludwig had complained in several interviews that German museums were not showing any works from the Nazi era. The tenor of the voices collected in Stäck’s volume was predominately negative: “Nazi art” was not art; it lacked quality and relevance; indeed, it was Unkunst (literally “un-art”); to put it on display in a museum was tantamount to ennobling it and insulting the victims of Nazi persecution. As the products of a deeply inhuman system, these works, so the writers argued, did not belong in a museum on ethical grounds. 

More than three decades after the publication of Stäck’s anthology, the debate has shifted in several significant ways, particularly in historiographical terms. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, Germans can now look back on not one but two dictatorships in their history. Whoever asks about how today’s scholars and institutions should address Nazi art can hardly ignore the related topic of how to deal with art created in East Germany. Nevertheless, conditions for researching art in the Nazi era are different, and the material basis is broader. One major digital tool that has become available in recent years is devoted to documenting the series of Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen (GDK)—the so-called Great German Art Exhibitions that were held under Nazi auspices in Munich between 1937 and 1944. The research platform GDK Research went online in 2011 and emerged from a collaboration between the Munich-based Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in cooperation with Berlin’s Deutsches Historisches Museum and Munich’s Haus der Kunst. As the website describes the project: “GDK Research publishes unknown photographic documents—evidence of art that was subsidized by the state during the Nazi era—in order to make source material available for critical discussion and analysis of the Nazi regime’s art and cultural policies.”

Already in 2001, the exhibition Taking Positions: Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds began opening up exactly this sort of critical, nuanced perspective. The show traveled to Germany in 2001–02, first to the Georg Kolbe Museum in Berlin and then to the Gerhard Marcks Haus in Bremen with a slightly different name: Untergang einer Tradition: Figürliche Bildhauerei und das Dritte Reich. Showing fifteen figurative works in bronze by such artists as Karl Albiker, Arno Breker, Fritz Klimsch, Georg Kolbe, and Gerhard Marcks, among others, Figurative Sculpture marked the first “attempt” since 1945 to “use art historical criteria to study, classify, and present German sculpture that was created during the Nazi era,” according the Kolbe Museum’s press release. “The main theme is not to show how sculpure was presented in the Nazi era. Rather, it is much more about showing how the idealized nude sculpture changed direction in the 1930s and 1940s.”

We should linger a moment on the regime’s best-known sculptor, a man who profited handsomely from Nazi patronage: Arno Breker himself. The only one-man exhibition of his work to be held in a public institution since 1945 took place in summer 2006 at the Schleswig Holstein Haus in Schwerin. The show was criticized for failing to present Breker in a way that opened up his career and work “to discussion”—despite the promise of the exhibition’s own title. Instead it took an uncritical view of Breker that made him look not only harmless but went so far as to style him a victim, which (appropriately enough) unleashed fierce controversy. Eckhart Gillen gives a thorough account of the entire affair in Arno Breker: Decorator of Power and Scapegoat of the Germans which appeared in a bilingual edition in 2015 as part of a series published by the Kunsthaus Dahlem, which is housed in Breker’s former studio.

The explosive element that has accompanied the topic of Nazi art in recent years is documented in a number of special exhibitions (most-ly with companion volumes), including, for example, at the Museum im Kulturspeicher Würzburg (2013); at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich and in Bergen, Norway (both in 2015–16); in the Art Collections of Ruhr-Universität Bochum (2016), a show that traveled in 2017 to the Kunsthalle Rostock and the Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie in Regensburg; in the Städtische Galerie Rosenheim (2017); and in the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck, Austria (2018–19). In the Netherlands, a show devoted to Nazi design was held at the Den Bosch Design Museum in the city of ‘s-Hertogenbosch (2019–20). In 2015 a noteworthy anthology appeared that examined different genres in order to ask whether there was in fact a specific kind of “National Socialist” art. Among other topics, the volume’s essays address the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste as well as Arno Breker and Adolf Ziegler.

One requirement of any serious account of art from the Nazi era is that it be accessible to the public, both in special exhibitions of the sort mentioned above as well as in permanent installations. Here, however, things look rather bleak. Nazi art (however one chooses to define it) is currently on view in only very few museums, and these are almost
excluding institutions with a historical or cultural-historical focus, such as the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. A notable and in my opinion laudable exception is Munich’s Pinakothek der Moderne, where Room Thirteen is devoted to artists under the Nazi regime. The paintings and sculpture on view here are, to quote the wall text, intended to give “an overview that illustrates the opposing styles and attitudes of artists toward the Nazi regime.” Hanging near Adolf Ziegler’s triptych The Four Elements—one of the regime’s best-known works of propaganda—are Surrealist paintings by Richard Oelze and Max Ernst, works “that were created in Paris and foreshadow disaster and the threat of fascism.”16

In 1999, the same year that Überbrückt conference proceedings appeared, the historian Lucian Hölscher wrote: “Our appraisal of the Third Reich must in any case become more complex…. For example, political judgments will no longer go hand in hand with aesthetics as a matter of course, as is already indicated by the heightened public controversy today over the aesthetic quality of Nazi art and architecture. It is very likely that the blanket exclusion from the history of modern art of artworks commissioned and celebrated by the Third Reich—a practice that is still widespread today—will soon come to an end.”17

Twenty years on, we must acknowledge that Hölscher’s prognosis has not come about. With the exception of a few misguided attempts (some of which I have named), the blanket exclusion he described still dominates. It is a pity that we are not showing more courage. Rather than demonizing all “Nazi art,” we must find a place for it within the museum, and this includes museums of fine art. Yet making a place for Nazi art undoubtedly demands careful historical and critical context. Such art must be continually reappraised, annotated, contextualized, and communicated through a highly sensitive and discerning didactic approach. The ethical, moral, aesthetic, and museological challenges involved are vast. For this subject raises a host of extremely complex issues: about how the institution of the museum sees its role in today’s society, about the relationship of art to politics, about the way art functions within a democracy. But we must face up to these challenges and grasp the opportunity to contribute to public discourse.

3. NOT ONLY/BUT ALSO (OR: NEITHER/NOR)

By devoting the first two sections to “degenerate art” and “Nazi art” respectively, I have been following the oversimplified distinction first introduced right after 1945 and subsequently handed down for decades. This model juxtaposes modern, politically progressive artists who were pilloried at the time as “degenerate” (i.e., the good ones) against artistically backward artists who willingly served and represented the Nazi state (i.e., the bad ones). This model in fact follows the very same—albeit reversed—distinction propagated by the Nazi state itself, a distinction that came to a didactic head in the regime’s two parallel exhibitions of “German” and “degenerate” art in 1937. In retrospect, my own 1995 dissertation for Universität Heidelberg on the subject of the Nazi “de-famatory” exhibitions, subsequently published as a book, is too starkly marked by this binary mode of thinking: the Nazi term entartet has long been understood to stand for modern—and morally good—in contrast to Nazi art, which was always backward and morally reprehensible.

In 1999, Lucian Hölscher’s call for evaluating Nazi art in more nuanced terms corresponded to one of the key stimuli sparking the Überbrückt colloquium that same year: the need to move away from this simplifying and all-too-convenient schema and instead develop a more subtle, critical view of art and artists under Nazism as well as in the postwar period. This required a readiness to debunk cherished myths and long-standing narratives of art history and to tolerate—and investigate—contradictions, inconsistencies, breaks, and fluid boundaries. I feel that many recent studies and projects have been pointing in this direction, including the 2019 exhibitions held in Berlin on Nolde at the Hamburger Bahnhof, and on the artists of the Brücke movement at the Brücke-Museum and at Kunsthau Dahlem that year. To continue with the example of Nolde: he was not only affected by Nazi persecution as a “degenerate” artist but also was a fervent anti-Semitic and Hitler admirer. At the same time, there were thousands of visual artists during the Nazi period who were not affected by the official campaign against Modernism or at the regime’s side with an official stamp of approval. Such artists may never have sought admission to the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste or to have their works shown at the Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen—or if they did apply, they were not accepted. More studies of such artists’ biographies would substantially improve our understanding of the room they had to maneuver within the Nazi state. At the same time, such studies would provide rich material for ongoing discussions surrounding the topic of “internal exile.”

The exhibition The Black Years: Histories of a Collection 1933–1945, held in 2015–16 at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, offered a multifaceted look at art, politics, and the history of museums under the Nazis. Its
focus was on two types of works in the collection of Berlin’s Nationalgalerie: works that were created and entered the collection to particular acclaim, and works that were seized as part of the degenerate art campaign. Certainly, the biographies of the artists included in the show were as diverse as the works themselves and their provenance histories.18

I conclude this section with a quick glance at Düsseldorf, where in 2019 the Kunstpalast organized an exhibition on Das Junge Rheinland to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the avant-garde group’s establishment. The show was subtitled “too beautiful to be real.” In nearby Bonn, Lukas Bächer is currently working on a doctoral dissertation on “adaptation and opposition” among the members of the same group both during the Nazi years and after 1945. Bächer is exploring the biographies of such artists as Carl Lauterbach, Otto Pankok, Theo Champion, and Richard Gessner. By examining the contradictions inherent in these careers, he is working beyond the black-and-white, polarized model.19

4. ART CRITICS AND ART HISTORIANS

The Überbrückt publication devoted two sections to art historians and art writers, including a section on Will Grohmann, an influential German art critic and champion of the avant-garde. A renaissance of research into his life and work is currently underway. The Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung has been financing a large-scale project on Grohmann led by Konstanze Rudert at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD). Three publications have already appeared.20 A further monograph is currently in preparation. In 1958, Grohmann became president of the German chapter of the International Association of Art Critics, following in the footsteps of the art historian and artist Franz Roh, whose book “Entartete Kunst: Kunstbarbarei im Dritten Reich” had appeared in 1962. Now, as before, more research into Roh’s life and work would be desirable. In terms of methodology, it is interesting to see how the analysis of social networks is increasingly being applied to art-related fields.

Another conference hosted by the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (in December 2013) focused on the controversial art historian Hans Posse, who in 1910 became director of the Dresden Gemäldegalerie and who worked from 1939 until his death in 1942 as Hitler’s own “special representative” for the so-called Führermuseum in Linz. In this capacity, Posse served as Hitler’s general buyer on the international art market, and his unprecedented access to confiscated Jewish property makes him a key figure even today for research into looted art.21 Posse kept a series of five travel diaries, which were discovered in his estate in Nuremberg. The Magdeburg-based Deutsche Zentrum Kulturgutverluste has funded an annotated online edition of Posse’s travel diaries, a project that began in 2017 and will continue through 2020.22 Posse was also charged with a large-scale program for distributing art stolen by the Nazis to museums in the so-called Ostmark as well as to other museums in the Third Reich. Birgit Schwarz, who has been working on the online edition of the diaries, made a thorough study of this in her 2018 book on Hitler’s “special mission,” the Ostmark.23

No less explosive is the question of how the academic discipline of art history—and its main practitioners—fared under Nazism. Here, the conference proceedings prepared by Ruth Heftig, Olaf Peters, and Barbara Schellwald on the “theories, methods, and practices” of art history in the Third Reich is of key importance. Its twenty-two papers cover biographical, theoretical, methodological/terminological, and cultural-historical issues in addition to a review of how the discipline was taught at the time.24 Monograph-length studies and chapters have recently appeared on such figures as Alois J. Schardt, Richard Hamann, and Alfred Stange.25 There is still a great deal to be done in this area, however, and much more to be desired.

5. INSTITUTIONS (MUSEUMS AND ART ACADEMIES)

Substantial progress has also been made researching Germany’s museums and art academies under Nazism. In 2013 the Richard Schöne Gesellschaft—a Berlin-based society for museum history—co-organized a symposium with the Deutsches Historisches Museum on “Museums under National Socialism.” According to its call for papers, areas of focus were to include “the political and administrative conditions for museum work, museum actors, collection practices, conceptions of museum display, forms of propaganda, museums in an international context, and how museums dealt with their National Socialist history in the period directly after the war.”26 The project met with enormous resonance, eliciting nearly one hundred submissions from twelve countries, twenty of which were presented at the symposium and included in the 2016 publication. Reviewing this volume, Christian Hirte emphasized that the publication poses “a challenge to dig deeper in a number of places.”27

A number of individual studies are also now available on this subject. Two notable examples are the study of the Städel Museum in Frank-
further prepared by Uwe Fleckner and Max Hollein, issued in 2012 as the sixth volume of the FU’s Forschungstelle “Entartete Kunst” series, and the 2013 study of Berlin’s state museums under the Nazis, which was edited by Jörn Grabowski and Petra Winter. The Kunstmuseum Stuttgart is presently preparing an exhibition with accompanying publication on this phase of its own history. There is further material in Timo Saalmann’s study of Berlin museum policy from 1919 to 1959.28

The history of the leading art schools during this period is also coming into sharper focus. Two examples worth highlighting are the 2012 Nuremberg exhibition catalog Geartete Kunst which looks at the Nürnberger Akademie in the Nazi years, as well as the 2015 collection of essays edited by Wolfgang Ruppert on the era’s artists, with a wide-ranging focus on “German” art, art policy, and the art academy in Berlin.29 At the same time, numerous art academies have yet to turn their attention to a full study of their own disconcerting histories in the Nazi era.

6. THE ART MARKET, ART DEALERS, AND COLLECTORS

A section of the Überbrückt volume contains three papers on the ambivalent role of art dealers under National Socialism. Significantly, this field of research—alongside the study of private collectors—has gained major momentum in recent years, which is connected not least with the growing importance of provenance research.

Here, too, research is being served by newly available online databases. One project very much worth naming is the database for German Modernism prior to 1939 and that it was only the Nazi campaign defaming modern art that helped it gain an international reputation immediately after the Nazi rise to power) or in 1937 (after the opening of the defamatory Entartete Kunst exhibition). Here research also calls into question the generalizations that there had been no international market for German Modernism prior to 1939 and that it was only the Nazi campaign defaming modern art that helped it gain an international reputation after 1945. It is true, however, that the Ministry of Propaganda’s sales prices for “degenerate” art were extremely low and that the profit margins that art dealers reaped upon resale were very high indeed. The four dealers appointed by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda to the commission for the “exploitation” of “degenerate” art—Bernhard A. Böhmer, Karl Buchholz, Ferdinand Möller, and Hildebrand Gurlitt—were officially only authorized to sell abroad in exchange for hard currency, but none of them actually complied with this directive. Although prices between 1948 and 1955 were higher compared with works sold between 1925 and 1944, the increase was not particularly drastic. Equally astounding is Jeuthe’s finding that there were actually marketing and sales opportunities for “degenerate” art within Nazi Germany itself, although these were admittedly somewhat limited.

In other words, it was possible to do “good” business. The exhibition Gute Geschäfte, organized by Christine Fischer-Defoy with the support of the nonprofit association Aktives Museum – Faschismus und
Widerstand Berlin, looked at art dealers in Berlin from 1933 to 1945 and was shown in 2011–13 at various Berlin venues, including the Centrum Judaicum and the Landesarchiv Berlin. The accompanying catalog is a rich source of material on no less than fourteen of Berlin’s art professionals—including the Propaganda Ministry’s designated art dealers Böhmer and Buchholz, the gallery owners Alfred Flechtheim and Karl Haberstock, and the auctioneers Hans W. Lange and Leo Spik—making it a veritable treasure trove on Nazi-era dealers in the German capital.

Some of the artists featured in the catalog have by now been the subject of monographs. These include Paul Graupe, on whom a study was published in 2016 that connects the Weimar and Nazi eras by looking at Berlin’s art business—much as, already in 2006, Angelika Enderlein’s published dissertation examined the city’s art trade through the example of the art dealer Robert Graetz (1875–1945). Another figure who ran his business from Berlin was Wolfgang Gurlitt—cousin of Hildebrand Gurlitt and, like him, a member of that family of art dealers, artists, and scholars. During the Nazi years, he did brisk business selling “degenerate” art and was also involved in the sale of looted Jewish property. His biography and personal art collection are, moreover, closely connected to the history of cultural assets and objects of all kinds—is currently experiencing a boom. (Full disclosure: I am part of this boom as the Alfred Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation Professor at the Universität Bonn, with a focus on provenance research and the history of collecting.)

Provenance study has long been part of the methodological toolkit of art studies, for example in connection with research into private and public collections, the art market, copyright, artwork authentication, and the compiling of catalogues raisonnés. For a long time, however, it was considered a kind of secondary field of scholarship, somewhat overshadowed within the academy. A change has been underway in recent years, although the current upward trend in provenance research is rooted less in art history than in contemporary politics—namely its key role in the intensified search for art stolen by the Nazis.

Studies of Nazi theft (by Hector Feliciano, Günther Haase, Jakob Kurz, Lynn H. Nicholas, and Jonathan Petropoulos, among others) were already appearing with greater frequency in the 1980s and 1990s, but the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art of December 3, 1999, brought new momentum to the subject. At the international Washington Conference on Holocaust Era Assets, forty-two countries endorsed a set of general principles for the restitution of assets (such as looted art) unlawfully seized during the Nazi period. In response, in December 1999, the Federal Republic of Germany, its states, and municipal umbrella organizations signed a joint declaration: public institutions (that is, not only museums but also libraries and archives) were henceforth to make an ongoing priority of the retrieval and restitution of “cultural property confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution, particularly Jewish losses.” This was a voluntary moral commitment, however—a matter of “soft” rather than “hard” law. (Unlike Austria for example, Germany has no formal law stipulating restitution.) If cultural assets are found to have been stolen, the Washington Principles call for finding “a just and fair solution” with the lawful owners or their heirs. This may involve restitution but does not have to. The return in August 2006 of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s 1913 Berlin Street Scene from the Brücke-Museum to a granddaughter of the German-Jewish art dealer Alfred Hess was one of the first cases in Germany to attract a high degree of international attention. A debate is still underway over whether the painting was in fact taken “as a result of Nazi persecution” and whether restitution was therefore appropriate.

After the Washington Conference, it would take ten more long years for the German government to systematically advance the search for looted art. It was only in 2008 that the Arbeitsstelle für Provenienzforschung (AIP) was established at the Institut für Museumsforschung
within the Berlin State Museums, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, and granted the authority to allocate public funds. From 2008 to 2011, one million euros were made available annually to museums, libraries, and archives wishing to comb through their collections for cultural assets stolen by the Nazis; the subsidies were subsequently increased incrementally and today amount to over four million euros per year.

In November 2013, the large cache discovered in Cornelius Gurlitt’s apartment set off worldwide reverberations and put considerable pressure on the German government. If proof were ever needed that the media not only reflect debates taking place within society but also drive change, the “Gurlitt case” is an apt example. January 1, 2015, saw the establishment of the DZK in Magdeburg. Today this foundation has taken over the work of the AIP and the Koordinierungsstelle Magdeburg, including operating the Lost Art Database online. And its scope has been greatly expanded. The record thus far: in numerous cases of proven looting, it has been possible to reach a “just and fair solution” in the spirit of the eighth Washington Principle. Since 1999, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation alone has restituted over 350 works of art and more than one thousand books to their prewar owners or their heirs. As of December 2019, the total number of projects supported by the AIP and DZK together amounted to 340.

In addition to covering the nazi period, two additional historical contexts involving unjust circumstances have also come within the DZK’s purview. The first instance involves expropriations made in the Soviet zone of occupation immediately after World War II and subsequently in the German Democratic Republic. The second involves a new field, the first instance involves expropriations made in the soviet zone of occupation immediately after World War II and subsequently in the German Democratic Republic. The second involves a new field, the speech given by French President Emmanuel Macron on November 28, 2017, in Burkina Faso; and third the November 2018 report prepared by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy advising the return of African cultural heritage, now available in three languages.41

What has all of this achieved, not only in terms of scholarly infrastructure but also in terms of content? There has been a slow but steady increase in employment in the field since 2002. That year Uwe M. Schneede, then director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, set up the first position for a provenance researcher on the museum’s staff. In March 2019, the board of the Berlin-based nonprofit association Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung surveyed its 280 members to gather the first precise data on its members’ employment situations. The survey touched on all employment, however, and was not limited to work in provenance research. The results: of the 160 members who answered the survey in full, some fifty-five (34 percent) held permanent jobs, of which those working outside of Germany accounted for almost 20 percent. The survey showed that a clear majority of those working in the field continue to do so in precarious, short-term jobs. We must strongly encourage the creation of additional permanent posts.

But how are qualified personnel being trained? For years, education in provenance research was mostly a matter of ad hoc “learning by doing” and exchange among colleagues (within the Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung, for example), but recent years have seen the establishment of educational programs within institutions of higher learning. Since 2011, the Freie Universität has offered a module on provenance research within its art history department. Structured professional qualification offerings have been available since 2016 in the areas of training and continuing education. The universities of Hamburg, Bonn, Munich, Berlin, and Lüneburg have each set up specialized professorships, although most of these are W1-ranked junior positions of limited duration; only the Bonn and Lüneburg professorships are tenured positions (on the W2 and W3 salary scale, respectively). The universities of Bonn and Würzburg currently offer special master’s programs in the field. Here, too, more permanent teaching posts are required to meet the growing needs in the field.

Intensified provenance research in museums is also shaping exhibition practice. In Germany, Austria, the United States, and France, there have been about a hundred exhibitions touching on the theme of art stolen by the Nazis, many of them accompanied by scholarly catalogs. Such exhibitions have drawn on provenance research undertaken within their respective institutions. Other significant projects were and continue to be partially or entirely financed by the DZK—among other institutions at the Munich-based Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte and the Freie Universität Berlin. In Munich, for example, scholars reconstructed the plundering in late April 1945 of artworks stored in the so-called Führerbau in Munich. An example in Berlin is the Moise Art Research Initiative (MARI), which documents the art collection of Rudolf Mosse.

To sum up, intensified provenance research in recent years has given significant momentum to scholarship on Nazi art policy—particularly with regard to stolen art. Above all, this has enhanced knowledge of
Let us keep in mind, however, that provenance work has many dimensions—much like the multivalent objects that it aims to study. As a methodology, it is not limited to questions of lawful or unlawful ownership; nor to giving clear-cut answers to the question of whether or not a work should be restituted; nor to the mere accumulation of facts and data on individual objects (although this research naturally forms the basis for all further interpretation). The study of provenance—understood as broad-gauged contextual research—allows for fresh insight into the history and acquisition strategies of the institutions in question. It sheds new light on the individual work by finding the place where an art object’s biography intersects with that of a particular collection. Moreover, knowledge of an object’s provenance has a direct impact on how it is perceived.

To counter an occasional criticism, provenance research does not lead us away from the object but rather opens up new approaches to how that object is understood. The fruit of provenance research should therefore be incorporated into permanent exhibits to an even greater extent than is presently the case; it must be (more) visible and (more) transparent to the public. Knowledge of provenance allows museums to offer the public alternative, new narratives that go beyond discussions of chronology, the history of style, and schools of artistic practice.

I believe that our newfound knowledge of the importance of provenance will change how we handle cultural assets in an enduring and profound way—and that provenance even has the potential to become a new paradigm in cultural studies and the humanities. For the field can be tied into numerous other subjects, disciplines, and discourses within the humanities and cultural fields. Provenance research can thus be connected to the culture of memory, to a society’s collective memory. I proposed calling this process the “provenancial turn.”

8. FUTURE PROSPECTS

My own perspective on how research into art and cultural policy under the Nazis has developed over the past two decades is ambivalent. There has been undeniable and significant progress in many areas. Attesting to this is the wealth of individual studies; the greater focus brought to the subject, not only among professionals but within the broader public as well; the new groundwork laid for a more subtle and nuanced approach; and developments in the digital world—including the important databases mentioned above—which have opened up powerful and entirely new research possibilities. At the same time, there is still so much to be examined in greater detail—especially in terms of the sometimes ambivalent and contradictory behavior of modern artists and their role in the Nazi state but also in the mechanisms and aftereffects of postwar art-historical canon building. We must keep in mind that the Unbewältigt colloquium of 2019 not only marked the twenty years since the publication of the Überbrückt volume. It also marked the sixtieth anniversary of Theodor W. Adorno’s call for a public discussion of the Nazi era in his famous 1959 speech “The Meaning of Working through the Past.”

I myself would like to see more courage in approaching this topic, more self-criticism (for example, in examining the role of art historians and the role of art history in the Nazi state), and more courage to provoke and initiate public debates, and to take a stance in them.

A discussion of the state of art history in Germany has been playing out since 2015 in the pages of the Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte. In 2016 Ulrich Pfisterer contributed a piece that tellingly likened art historians working today to the happy-go-lucky protagonist of Grimms’ fairy tale, Hans in Luck. “And who would have thought,” he asks, “that subjects like ’looted art,’ restitution, and the protection of cultural property would not only arouse public interest and political action but would even inspire profitable films with titles like Monuments Men and Woman in Gold?” A bit further on, the Munich-based art historian warns his colleagues against seeking to “lighten” their “baggage,” criticizing their “scant interference in public issues, lack of courage for developing real theoretical models and large-scale designs, defensive posturing when it comes to restructuring the university and academic landscape, and retreat into one’s own professional comfort zone.” Pfisterer concludes by calling on his colleagues, “after all their luck,” to accept “the challenge and the hope that they will in the future dare to pick up and carry a little more weight—in public debate, in their ambitions for the discipline, and in the scope of their vision.”

Is it even possible to imagine a subject better suited to this challenge, or a topic more urgent, than art and cultural policy under the Nazis?


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