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Seized art towards the end of the war

Immediately following the start of World War Two, Adolf Hitler ordered that the holdings of confiscated artwork kept in museums in Vienna and in the Central Depot be stored outside Vienna to protect them from damage caused by bombs. The most important pieces in the Central Depot were brought to the abandoned Benedictine Convent Kremsmünster in Upper Austria. Art work which was difficult to transport was deposited in special bomb shelters in Vienna.[1]

Towards the end of 1943, after the territory of Austria had come within reach of the allied bombers, the NS authorities started to bring together in a central location artwork which had been stored in different places. The chosen location was the salt mines Altaussee and Lauffen near Bad Ischl in Upper Austria. The remoteness of the area, the natural protection provided by the mountain and the climatic conditions made these mining tunnels ideal locations for storage. Apart from the collections of the Museum of Art History, the National Socialists also stored some of the artwork from the Vienna Central Depot in Lauffen.[2] In Altaussee, however, several thousand works of art from various origins were gathered. Apart from artwork which had been designated for the planned Führer Museum, the mining tunnels of Altaussee stored numerous other stolen or temporarily relocated works of art or works which had been removed from all parts of the Third Reich.[3]

During the last days of the war the artwork in Altaussee and Lauffen only barely escaped being destroyed. In August 1944 Hitler had issued the Nero Order[4], a directive to leave the advancing allied troops scorched earth. The responsibility for the execution of this action was borne by the Gauleitungen, the highest ranking official in each region.[5]

The experts and miners working in the mining tunnels were able to prevent the destruction of these works of art during the last days of the war. They delayed and sabotaged the plans for destruction hoping that the Allied troops would soon arrive.[6]

On May 6, 1945 the first American troops arrived in the area of Bad Ischl.[7] After the collapse of the NS regime the US Army was given the difficult task of organizing the return of numerous works of art to their original owners. Much of the artwork stored in Altaussee and Lauffen was, for administrative reasons, initially brought to Munich to the Central Art Collecting Point.[8] The collections of museums and their acquisitions during 1938 to 1945, however, remained in the mining tunnels until their transport to the museums was possible.[9]

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[1] Haupt H, *Jahre der Gefährdung. Das Kunsthistorische Museum 1938 – 1945*, Vienna 1995, at 19 (quoted hereafter as: Haupt, *Jahre der Gefährdung*).

[2] Ibid, at 51f.

[3] Nicholas L H, *Der Raub der Europa. Das Schicksal europäischer Kunstwerke im Dritten Reich*, Munich 1995, at 413f (quoted hereafter as: Nicholas, *Raub der Europa*).

[4] The fight for the existence of our people forces us to employ all means also within the territory of the Reich which weaken the fighting power of our enemy and hinder the enemy's further advance. [...] All military, transport, communication, industrial and supply installation as well as material assets within the territory of the Reich which the enemy can use now or in the near future for the continuation of its fight must be destroyed., March 19, 1945 quoted in: *Dokumente zur Deutschen Geschichte*, Berlin 1977, at 109.

[5] Nicholas, *Raub der Europa*, at 415.

[6] Ibid, at 417

[7] Ibid, at 193

[8] Brückler T, *Quellendokumentation* in: Theodor Brückler (publ.), *Kunstraub, Kunstbergung und Restitution in Österreich 1938 bis heute*, Vienna-Cologne-Weimar, 1999, at 260.

[9] Haupt H, *Das Kunsthistorische Museum. Die Geschichte des Hauses am Ring. Hundert Jahre im Spiegel historischer Ereignisse*, Vienna, 1991, at 184f.

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