



The seizure of art during the National Socialist Regime in Austria

The seizure of privately held art was an important element of the policy of expropriation and extermination directed against the Jewish population in National Socialist Germany. After the "*Anschluss*" of Austria in March 1938 and the first unregulated "wild" acts of looting against Jews, the National Socialists started the systematic and organized seizure of assets, including artwork, particularly in Vienna. Here, the National Socialist regime strove to conduct the seizure on the basis of legal regulations introduced for this purpose: Tax demands, export embargoes, expropriations and confiscations were used for the purpose of seizure of assets. Museums, auction houses and art specialists were actively involved in these asset seizures as "experts", intermediaries and buyers. Thus thousands of works of art in the possession of private individuals, from family heirlooms to valuable art collections, changed hands under duress. On the one hand, they became private property again via the art market or through sales by the Gestapo Office for the Disposal of the Property of Jewish Emigrants (VUGESTA). On the other hand, numerous objects found their way into state collections and museums or were seized for the planned "Führer Museum" in Linz by Adolf Hitler's own art agents.

The majority of the artwork confiscated from or sold under duress by persecuted Jewish people still existed after the end of World War Two. During the war years, part of the stolen artwork, together with other cultural assets, had been stored in bomb-proof underground shelters from where allied troops were able to secure them for subsequent identification and restitution. The majority, however, was widely spread and publicly or privately owned without any obvious indication of their provenance. Legal bases for the return of the stolen objects have existed in principle in Austria since the introduction of the restitution laws in 1947. However, the specifically designed restitution of art and cultural assets from public property has only been regulated by law since 1969. The real obstacle to the retrieval of seized art though was a factual problem: The difficulties encountered by survivors of the persecution or their heirs to even be able to learn of the whereabouts of their former property.

The following gives additional summaries on art seizure during the National Socialist regime in Austria. Please find further literature in the list in the navigation.

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