



## Book Review

**Birgit Kirchmayer and Pia Schölnberger, (eds.),** *Restituiert. 25 Jahre Kunstrückgabegesetz in Österreich, Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Provenienzforschung*, Volume 9, Vienna: Czernin, 2023, 398 pp., ISBN: 978-3-7076-0824-3.

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To mark its 25th anniversary, the Commission for Provenance Research has published a comprehensive assessment of its work; this includes the different federal collections as well as state and municipal institutions, for instance the Wien Museum and Lentos in Linz. The book is divided into two parts, the first part contains essays by renowned authors who report on the development of provenance research in Austria and in the international context. The second part contains twenty-five shorter contributions representing twenty-five years of provenance research in case studies. Some of the individual contributions will be discussed below. In their introduction, the editors succinctly summarize the book's unique features. Its "primary purpose is not a quantitative display of achievements, but rather a reflection on and a multi-perspective approach to the various dimensions of restitution, while at the same time the wide range of stories, objects, actors and constellations of restitutions that have taken place to date should be made accessible in an exemplary manner" (Kirchmayer, Schölnberger, p. 12, translation D.H.).

Accordingly, Anne Dewey and Charlotte Woodhead in their international comparison between Austria, the United Kingdom, and several other countries emphasize that "the Austrian practice is characterized by an *ex officio* procedure that begins with proactive research carried out by the legally anchored Commission for Provenance Research. Thus, at international level, Austria is unique in this approach, although the law itself does not provide a legally enforceable claim for restitution and, in principle, is solely applicable to federally owned art" (p. 42). The Art Restitution Act does not apply to objects in museums belonging to the federal counties, local authorities, or to private collections. However, starting with the City of Vienna and the Wien Museum, many public collections have developed practices for provenance research and the restitution of confiscated cultural assets.

At the beginning of the Commission for Provenance Research's activities, mostly objects from well-known collections were processed. The shift towards the sociological middle class of former collectors is a rather recent development (p. 61). One of the latter cases is the confiscation the assets formerly owned by the sisters Elise Richter (1865–1943, Theresienstadt) and Helene Richter (1861–1942,

Theresienstadt). Elise Richter was a well-known scholar of Romance languages and literature at the University of Vienna, and Helene Richter was a recognized scholar and translator of English literature. Their private research library comprised more than 8,000 volumes, an extensive theater collection, and autographs. Their property was successively confiscated after the Anschluss. The Cologne University Library and the Austrian National Library were the biggest benefactors. Parts of the library disappeared. Today, the estate is dispersed in various public institutions. As the two sisters had no children and most of their relatives had died or had been murdered in the Shoah, there was no probate after 1945. The complex research into this case is still ongoing (Nicole-Melanie Goll, Mathias Lichtenwagner, pp. 238–245). Sometimes, unexpected places reveal traces of lost objects. In the case of the Richter sisters, the diaries of Robert Adam Pollak (1877–1961), former President of the Commercial Court of Vienna and a writer, held disclosers. Pollak himself survived in Vienna with his Aryan wife Maria and their son Viktor Patzner (1916–1982). On 8 March 1943, he recorded in his diary that he had seen books belonging to Dr. Helene Richter on the premises of the Council of Elders in Vienna.<sup>1</sup> With the permission of the Gestapo, the Council of Elders was able to transfer books from the homes of deportees to its premises in Seitenstettengasse. In April 1943, the “Council of Elders” received permission to set up a lending library in the office building, which began operating on 15 July 1943.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the Commission for Provenance Research’s work, it was still possible to return objects directly to survivors. This has become increasingly rare in recent years. Sabine Loitfellner reported in her article (pp. 120–135) on the activity of “transgenerational restitution” in connection with the increasingly complex research of heirs. In this context, reference should be made to the contributions of two heirs belonging to the second generation, namely Stephen M. Mautner (pp. 152–159) and Maria Hochreiter (pp. 160–176), who both reported on the difficult and often incomplete transmission regarding their family history as well as their belongings. Mautner, born in 1952, also recorded the significance of the discovery of aryanized objects at the houses of neighbors and former friends:

Many years after my family’s 1957 vacation in Austria, when I was old enough to appreciate the significance of the story my mother wished to share with me, she told me that she and my father had been invited for afternoon tea that summer by a Grundlsee neighbor. Despite the cordial conversation and delicious refreshments with old friends, my mother couldn’t help but notice that several objects – a small painting, a vase, and a set of Venetian glasses – that used to be in grandmother Anna’s house were now there among the neighbor’s personal effects. She

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<sup>1</sup> Diary of Robert Adam Pollak, 8 March 1943, Typoscript, Austrian National Library, HAD, Sig. 52272.

<sup>2</sup> Dieter J. Hecht/Michaela Raggam-Blesch/Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, *Topographie der Shoah. Gedächtnisorte des zerstörten jüdischen Wien 1938–1945*, Vienna: Mandelbaum, <sup>2</sup>2018, pp. 489–492.

wondered: Did they remember where these came from? Why didn't they conceal them from guests who would surely recognize them? Had they simply forgotten? Did they even care? My mother was too polite to say anything, but she carried mixed feelings about those neighbors forever after. (Mautner, p. 156).

In some cases, private restitution is now taking place as well, as Lisa Frank wrote in her article on private restitution initiatives that are not subject to the Art Restitution Act (Frank, pp. 76–88). Nowadays, some families know that objects in their possession have been confiscated, still it has not yet been possible to identify their former owners. The lack of provenance is often a problem for public institutions and collections as well. Exhibitions of these objects can bring their history to the public eye and consciousness. On the one hand, this could lead to the identification of the object, which then can be assigned to the former owners; on the other hand, it promotes a discourse on unlawfully acquired property by private individuals and its appropriation. The new transgenerational owners have often no awareness of injustice in this regard. Despite all the past and future merits of the Commission for Provenance Research and all other institutions involved in the restitution process, the accusation that the Republic of Austria and many of its inhabitants have dealt with restitution “too little, too late” remains valid. Nevertheless, the Commission for Provenance Research presented an important contribution to provenance research and the discourse on dealing with looted cultural assets in Austria and beyond.