Problems in Provenance Research

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In May of 1999 my colleague Marcy Neth and I were asked to organize a panel session on World War II-era provenance research for the ARLIS/NA conference to be held in Pittsburgh in March 2000. Our initial idea had been a discussion session in which librarians actively involved in this kind of research could share strategies, resources, and frustrations. We realized, however, that a panel of speakers engaged in provenance research at different institutions might shed light on the problems common to this kind of research and the potential contribution of art librarians. We therefore decided to moderate a panel session in addition to a discussion session. Excited as we were by this prospect, we were unprepared for the difficulty of finding speakers. Many of the curators and archivists we approached were unwilling to discuss this politically charged subject publicly.

Their reticence is understandable. The media has, in some cases, been highly critical of museums for acquiring looted works of art in the years following the war. Often museums have limited resources for carrying out thorough reviews of their collections, yet they do not wish to appear inattentive to this issue. Unfortunately, the self-imposed silence of many involved in provenance research only exacerbates the difficulty of this task. Research into the history of ownership of a work of art is incredibly challenging under the best of circumstances. It relies on access to a wide range of unpublished, uncataloged, and unindexed resources, many of which fall outside the normal confines of art history. It simply cannot be carried out in isolation.

A Role for Librarians

Provenance research has always been an important task for art historians, who have used it to better understand the meaning, function, and importance of works of art. It has recently taken on an added urgency for museum-based scholars as works of art looted before and during World War II have surfaced in public collections. In December of 1998, the U.S. State Department released eleven principles to assist in resolving this issue. These principles echoed earlier resolutions by the Association of Art Museum Directors to seek out and identify works in their collections that may have been looted. Museums have also begun to evaluate the provenance of works being considered for purchase or exhibition. The resulting push to track down the provenance of significant numbers of artworks has created challenges for art librarians. What role should we play in this research? How can we best aid the wide range of researchers delving into the uncharted seas of provenance research?

Our introduction to the difficulties of World War II-era provenance research began in June of 1998. In response to the Association of Art Museum Directors’ resolutions, the Art Institute of Chicago hired four researchers specifically for this task. This spring the Art Institute published on its Web site a list of 548 works of art with incomplete or suspicious provenance. Provenance research continues as both works in the museum and works considered for acquisition are being examined. Our role throughout this process has been to offer instruction and support to the provenance researchers. To this end, we have produced bibliographies of useful resources, several of which now reside on the Art Institute’s Web site. We have also offered workshops and one-on-one bibliographic instruction, acquired relevant publications, and pushed interlibrary loan to its limits.

Despite our best efforts, researchers were frequently unable to establish the complete provenance of an artwork for the crucial period of 1933–1945. In some cases documentation of the work during these years simply did not exist. In other cases we lacked access to, or knowledge of, resources held by other institutions both in the United States and abroad. As our ARLIS/NA panel and discussion sessions made clear, similar problems were encountered by researchers at other institutions, including the National Gallery, the Pierpont Morgan Library, and the Commission for Art Recovery. We would like to describe some of the paths followed by provenance researchers at the Art Institute of Chicago. Our experiences working with them over the last two years has led us to believe that a crucial role for art librarians in the future will be to document share resources useful for World War II-era provenance research.

Searching for Provenance at the Art Institute of Chicago

After identifying works with missing or suspicious provenance for the years 1933–1945, researchers at the Art Institute of Chicago begin by combing institutional records. If these fail to provide the necessary information, they turn to public sources such as monographs, journal articles, exhibition catalogues, and catalogues raisonnés. When these standard tools of art history leave troubling gaps, or reveal the names of collectors at whom little is known, researchers typically consult libraries and other collections for locating information relating to the sale of the art work. The biography of a collector.

Sale information is vital for provenance research, and the moment when a work of art changes hands is sometimes the only point at which it becomes visible. During the 1930s and 1940s, large numbers of art works were sold as collectors were dispossessed or forced to flee. Many other works were sold illegally. Sale catalogs contain critical information about owners and locations of art works, and the circumstances of
th they were sold. The Ryerson and Burnham Libraries has a collection of over 70,000 sale catalogs. Through SCIPIO, we have access to catalogs held by nineteen other art libraries in the United States, Canada and Great Britain.

SCIPIO

SCIPIO (the Research Libraries Group’s Sale Catalog Index Project Input Online) is the only online union catalog of auction sale catalogs. Currently it contains nearly 500,000 records for catalogs dating from the late sixteenth century to the present. Frits Lugt’s valuable catalog of auction sale catalogs covers those published only up to 1925, making it less useful for World War II-era research. Compared to auction indexes which provide sale information about specific works of art, SCIPIO provides information only about the sale catalog itself, including the title, date of sale, auction house and, in some cases, seller names.

Last year a curator asked us to locate sale information pertaining to the painting Rock at Hautepierre by Gustave Courbet, which was acquired by the Art Institute in 1967. Published sources revealed that the painting had once belonged to Max Silverberg, a German-Jewish industrialist who was killed in the Holocaust. A search for Silverberg in the seller name index in SCIPIO turned up a 1935 sale catalog from the Paul Graupe Gallery in Berlin. We ordered the catalog from the Frick Art Reference Library through interlibrary loan. The catalog revealed that Rock at Hautepierre was included in the forced sale of Silverberg’s collection. The Art Institute has subsequently contacted Silverberg’s heir with this information.

The seller name index in SCIPIO is invaluable, but it is woefully incomplete. Also, large numbers of European sale catalogs are not to be found in SCIPIO because they are not held by any of the contributing libraries. In order to become a more useful tool for provenance research, SCIPIO must expand to include the holdings of more libraries, in particular art libraries in Europe.

Other Sale Information

Indexes to auction sales are often the best way to find when and where a work of art changed hands. We have created a list of auction indexes from the 1930s and 1940s, together with the dates and types of material they cover, for the use of Art Institute staff. We are in the process of editing this list for placement on our Web site. However, during this period indexes were not nearly as comprehensive as they are today. They were also published irregularly. It is often necessary to turn to other sources for sale information.

If one has a relatively precise idea of when an artwork sold, sale information can sometimes be found in contemporary art periodicals. In one notable case, a researcher was able to gather information about an estate sale from a classified advertisement that appeared in a provincial German newspaper. Because provenance research relies on sources outside the field of art history, ready access to nearby research libraries such as the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, the Chicago Public Library, and the Center for Research Libraries has been a tremendous asset.

Jallery Records

In 1998, the Commission for Art Recovery compiled a list of dealers known to have sold looted art. Unpublished gallery records are often the only source of provenance information relating to artworks sold through these dealers. In July of 1998, a curator asked us to locate the records of art dealers whose names appeared both on the Commission’s list and in the provenance of works in the museum’s collection. Large collections of records from European art dealers were confiscated by the occupying Allied forces after the war. These now reside in the National Archives and Records Administration. Still other records are held by the Archives of American Art. Using NARA’s Finding Aid to Holocaust Era Assets and the catalog of the Archives of American Art, we were able to locate the gallery records and personal papers of some of the dealers on our list. We found that other businesses are still operating and allow only limited access to their records. We were simply unable to locate most of the gallery records we sought. It is vital for successful provenance research that institutions holding such records publish some record of what they have and make their holdings available to the wider scholarly community.

Biographical Information

In order to determine whether a work left a collector’s hands legitimately, researchers need to know who that collector was and what became of him. Finding this information presents yet another challenge. In contrast to artists, collectors often lead private, undocumented lives. Occasionally their names appear in biographical dictionaries, but more often directories of collectors and dealers produced during the period in question provide the only published information about them. An entry in such a directory offers little more than an address, yet this can lead researchers to more detailed information from the region where a collector lived.

The World Wide Web has made finding information about private individuals much easier. Recently researchers at the Art Institute sought information about a German collector with a distinctive surname. A Web search of German telephone directories turned up the phone number of a relative, who provided researchers with valuable information. In the case of our research into Courbet’s Rock at Hautepierre, a search for Max Silverberg’s name using the Northern Light search engine revealed not only information about his life, but the fact that his daughter-in-law was actively seeking artworks from his collection. The Commission for Art Recovery is currently developing a Web-based tool that will help victims of looting and their families communicate with institutions that have artworks with missing provenance in their collections. The input of collectors and their families is vital to provenance research.

The Panel Session

The composition of our panel, which included an art librarian, an archivist, a curatorial assistant, and a researcher working to aid victims of looting and their heirs, reflected the wide range of people involved in provenance research and the different ways it is carried out at various institutions. Nancy Yeide, who is the Head of the Department of Curatorial Records at the National Gallery of Art, is responsible for reviewing the museum’s entire collection of European paintings and researching any works with critical gaps in their provenance. As a result, she was able to provide an overview of the entire process. This perspective is valuable for librarians, who are generally called in as consultants in particular cases, rather than following them from start to finish.

Jennifer Tonkovich, a Curatorial Assistant at the Pierpont Morgan Library, researches the provenance of works that come to the library on loan. She discussed the difficulties particular to
researching works from private collections. Not only is there less documentation of such artworks, but the demand for privacy limits the number of people that can be involved. Here again, the volatile nature of inquiries into World War II-era provenance serves as a barrier to effective research. Nancy Yeide stressed the importance of consulting organizations such as the International Federation of Art Research, the Commission for Art Recovery, and the Presidential Commission on Holocaust Assets, as well as agencies responsible for restitution issues in Europe. However, such collaboration is not always possible for those who must protect the privacy of collectors. This has also been an issue for us in certain cases where the Art Institute has considered works for purchase from private collectors.

Of particular value was the perspective of Evie Jousew, Director of Research at the Commission for Art Recovery. She described her work helping victims of looting, many of whom have only their memories of lost artworks to guide them. Her methods are very similar to those of museum-based researchers. In order to locate such a work and confirm that it did indeed belong to the person who instituted the search, she must reconstruct the chain of hands through which the work has passed. What emerged most poignant to her talk was the image of aging collectors and their families, attempting to retrieve a lost part of their history.

As Jack Perry Brown, Director of the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, pointed out, museums have a commitment to act fairly towards these collectors. In addition to helping the victims of looting, World War II-era provenance research provides a vivid and historically important image of the art world rocked by the depression, the rise of fascism and the Second World War. The chaos researchers encounter as they delve into this work reflects the chaos of a period when, by some estimates, sixty per cent of the artwork in Europe changed hands.

Art Librarian Network Needed

Although these speakers each presented a different perspective, the problems common to provenance research came up repeatedly. As Nancy Yeide stated in her talk, each case is unpredictable and inconclusive. Research is complicated, multidisciplinary, and dependent on people and cooperation. It was affirming to hear that other researchers struggled with the same difficulties that have plagued us, and that we strengthened our resolve to create a network through which art librarians can share strategies and resources for provenance research, ultimately improving the way it is done in the future. The advent of databases and the Internet has made it much easier for collectors to trace their long-lost art. Librarians can shape and develop tools to better serve the needs of everyone involved.

Notes
4. For more information about SCIPIO, see the Research Libraries Group information page at www.rlg.org/sg/scipiofaq.html
5. This list was published in the January 1998 issue of the Art Newspaper.

The Archives of American Art's online catalog can be accessed at artarchives.si.edu/.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

I list here some of the most useful sources for provenance research. This bibliography is by no means a complete record of the sources we have used in the Ryerson Library. Rather, it should be regarded as a core of important works for those beginning provenance research.

SECONDARY SOURCES


BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION


SALES INFORMATION


SCIPIO


PRIMARY SOURCES


"Reports of the Art Looting Investigations Unit, including some reports of the Office of Strategic Services and the Strategic Services Unit," Records of the American Commission the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments War Areas (Record Group 239.2) National Archives, Washington, DC 1942–47.