
Concerned with the provenance of art works stolen from Jewish collectors and patrons before and during World War II, this book follows the attempts to restitute these works in the aftermath of the war and in the years since 1998 when forty-four countries, including Germany, Austria and the United States, signed the Washington Principles guiding the restitution of Nazi-looted art.

Beginning in the 1920s, German Jewish citizens were faced with increasingly draconian racial laws. Forced to abandon their property and businesses, those fortunate enough to escape paid an exorbitant flight tax. Their art was often held as ransom. Collections were confiscated or “bought” from the owner for a fraction of their worth and dispersed to private buyers, museums, and high ranking Nazi officials.

As in Lynn H. Nicholas’s seminal 1994 book, The Rape of Europa, the authors recount the rampant art looting perpetrated by the Nazis in all conquered territories. Authors Muller, an expert on Anne Frank, and Tatzkow, an authority on art restitution, focus here on the owners of the works of art, providing biographical studies, detailing the history of their art collecting, and the artist-patron relationships they cultivated. Certain emphasis is placed on particular artists and masterpieces, such as Klimt’s Adele Bloch Bauer I and Kirchner’s Berlin Street Scene. Fifteen collectors from Berlin, Vienna, and Holland are chronicled, including some well known, such as a branch of the Viennese Rothschild family; others are more recently prominent, like Holland’s Jacques Goudstikker, whose collection and the restitution battle over his estate are the focus of the exhibition and catalog, Reclaimed (2006).

The book paints a portrait of a vanished European Jewish society. From rich, cultured, and assimilated lives, some collectors fled from one country to the next; others were transported to Terezin and Auschwitz where they were murdered. Those who survived often spent the rest of their lives searching for their art works, and now their heirs are seeking justice.

The final chapter provides a short review of the history of legal commentary on Nazi-looted art.

While this is a scholarly work, strangely there are no notes. Acknowledgements and sources are provided at the end of the book, listing the archival repositories, books, and people consulted.

Generously illustrated, with photographs of the main players, period photographs of the collections in situ, and color plates of many art works and reproductions of archival documents, this book is highly recommended for students of art and design, art history, art law, and the Holocaust.

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