Provenance: Not the Problem (The Solution)
Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative

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Project Overview  In 2008, the Smithsonian expanded its commitment to World War II-era provenance research on works of art. The Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative (SPRI) was founded, as an institution-wide project, with the goal of enabling such research at all Smithsonian museums and in order to clarify questions concerning gaps in ownership history, transfer of ownership, and unlawful appropriation. The SPRI director matches provenance specialists with curators and collection managers; together they create proactive plans that are both realistic and long-term. Factors they consider in setting research priorities include existing collections, future acquisitions, publications, exhibition preparation, and incoming and outgoing loans. Currently the SPRI is focused on Asian art and decorative arts—emerging fields of study in WWII-era collecting.

Given the Smithsonian’s mandate for broad service to the arts, SPRI also promotes provenance research beyond the Smithsonian’s own museums and archives. Through scholarly exchange in the United States and Europe—symposia, publications, online resources, and training programs for established and emerging professionals—SPRI fosters partnerships with other institutions that speed up the work and often lead to new findings. SPRI shares its research findings as widely as possible to increase the public’s access to collections.

Over the longer term, SPRI aims to expand beyond the WWII era, to assist with more current provenance issues, and to explore the implications of this research for art history and connoisseurship. We strive to anchor the museum in its core missions: stewardship, education, and appreciation of all cultures. Timely performance of research, and timely publication of results, can help strengthen confidence in the integrity of museums’ commitment to provenance projects as a core
aspect of their cultural role. It will also engage interest in the art works themselves through the new stories the research reveals. This can only benefit institutions that rely greatly on the patronage and financial support of the public.

In 2009, not long after I had taken on the leadership of the Smithsonian’s WWII-era provenance project, I attended a series of town hall meetings hosted by the U.S. Department of State on provenance issues. I will never forget these meetings, as it was the first time I had witnessed outright hostility toward museums. Several lawyers criticized museums for following American legal procedures and standard museum practice, and their voices drowned out the accounts of the good work museums are doing in provenance research. Recently, after a lecture on the Monuments Men at the Smithsonian, a research intern overheard a visitor remark: “You know, most things in museums were looted or stolen.” When the press’ reporting of WWII-era claims is too one-sided or sensationalist, this increases the distrust. How is it that art museums—public, educational institutions that preserve cultural treasures—have come to be cast in a light that makes them appear shady?

Museums advocate thorough, careful, and sensitive provenance research as part of their professional practices, but sometimes lack the resources to move the work along faster. After the Washington Conference in 1998, the American Association of Museums (now American Alliance of Museums) and American Association of Museum Directors issued guidelines (1999) and published workbooks (2001) to instruct their members in how to tackle the research. Museums are continually re-evaluating and improving methods in the field: the Association of American Art Museum Director’s 2013 revisions to its 2008 Guidelines for Acquisition of Archaeological Material and Ancient Art is an example. Gary Vikan’s essay in this journal suggests proactive strategies when dealing with “orphaned” objects or potentially looted art, and points out the opportunity here for the public to peruse an institution’s list of works with potentially problematic provenance. Steve Clark’s essay documents how museums work directly with claimants in order to resolve questions of ownership in amicable ways. Museums are very aware of the challenges of dealing with objects that have gaps in ownership history, because there are few objects that have a perfect provenance.

This journal focuses on the methodologies and proactive tendencies of art historians, whose case studies reveal that their provenance research is not just a matter of “clearing the object.” Provenance matters have been a part of art history at least since the Renaissance, and museum professionals are among the best-qualified practitioners of such specialized research today. While newly digitized archival resources, accessible through the web from anywhere, are aiding scholars, some of the most exciting research happens when they connect with primary resources on-site and have tangible encounters with other people. And although the internet can share information with great speed, it can also distort it in the process, removing it from its context. Scholarship is not a cut-and-paste encounter with information—it
takes time, reflection, and creative detective work—work that gives the overall re-
search a broader context, and often leads to better results.

Object labels and posting collections online do not complete the museum’s obligation for transparency. When museums share the complexities of the processes and expertise needed to generate provenance research findings, we show respect for the public. This transparency offers an opportunity to re-engage the public with museum collections in new ways. Lynn Nicholas concludes her Introduction by remarking that the research produces narratives often “as fascinating a social and historical document as the work of art itself.” When we introduce these stories, to-
gether with connoisseurship, we cultivate the public’s appreciation for what an art museum can uniquely do—teach the power of art by engaging with the objects.

**Smithsonian’s Commitment to Provenance Research**

The Smithsonian Institution includes 19 federal museums and galleries. Preserving cultural treasures and facilitating research are central to the Smithsonian’s mission to “increase and diffuse knowledge.” With some 137 million objects, including artworks, artifacts, and living specimens from around the world, the Smithsonian is a leader in the development of acquisition and collection policies. In the late 1990s, the Smithsonian was one of the first institutions to develop clear procedures in re-
sponse to WWII-era provenance inquiries and claims. Its museums assessed their collections based on three criteria—objects that were created before 1946 and ac-
quired after 1932, that underwent a change of ownership between 1933 and 1945 and were, or might have been, in continental Europe during that period. Seven mu-
seums identified objects that met these criteria.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden was the first Smithsonian mu-
seum to initiate a comprehensive research program, following AAM/AAMD guide-
lines, which advocated priority for European paintings and Judaica. Hirshhorn curato-
rial staff was already engaged in intensive collection research, so the new provenance 
push, aided by added staff, fell naturally in line with its curatorial practices. In 2004, the Smithsonian launched its own website to make all of the museum’s findings transpar-
ent and accessible. In creating a web presence, as well as by contributing lists of works with gaps in ownership to the AAM’s Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal (NEPIP), the Smithsonian was among a proactive group of museums, including the Metropoli-
tan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and the Saint Louis Art Museum, which established Nazi-era prov-
enance internet websites highlighting objects for which research is a goal.

We also work with other branches of the U.S. government, including the De-
partment of State’s Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues. The Smithso-
nian’s Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) organizes training workshops for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, who try to prevent the trafficking of illicit objects. Since the Smithsonian is a national institution, when issues
of returning cultural property arise we work on a government-to-government basis through State Department channels. Over the last ten years claims for the return of art and cultural objects have involved only three of our museums: the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (Freer and Sackler Galleries).

**Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative (SPRI)**

As a Smithsonian curator, and as part of my position in the Office of the Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture at the Smithsonian, I formed and lead a team of provenance specialists across the Institution. SPRI’s core team of four work closely with curatorial departments in five museums to identify groups of objects for research. They are in constant touch with curators, historians, archivists, registrars, conservators, and collection management staff in order to assess and implement collection-specific methods of research. We share results through various platforms, including publications, online collection databases, and finding aids to archival holdings. Despite greatly increased workloads resulting from reduced financial resources, and greater emphasis on acquisitions, donor relations, high-profile exhibitions, and fundraising, curators understand that provenance plans must align with their daily and long-term priorities. SPRI contributes professional research expertise to help assure the success and sustainability of each program.

In 2008, we started the first focused project at the Freer and Sackler Galleries with leadership support at all levels and Federal funds allocated for the research. This allowed us to hire a team of three experts for a year. SPRI recommended that Freer and Sackler Galleries see this project as an opportunity to lead the field by addressing the ownership history of Asian art in collections that may have been misappropriated during World War II. At that time, many collectors of European modern art were also collecting Japanese, Chinese, and non-Western art. While we focus on the path of each individual artwork, we also take a systematic approach that identifies groups of related objects to streamline and contextualize the research. The Freer and Sackler Galleries project has become a model for other projects at Smithsonian museums. We are now working with Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum to expand its methods and practices into another relatively-unexplored field of WWII-era provenance—decorative arts and design.

**Advancements in Asian Art Provenance**

The Freer and Sackler Galleries are together considered one of the world’s finest collections of the arts of the Far and Near East. The founder of the Freer Gallery, Charles Lang Freer, grounded his collection in “connoisseurship tempered by the
subsequent disciplines of scholarship.” Freer not only acquired objects, he also collected collateral materials related to their provenance. The Freer and Sackler Galleries’ succeeding directors and curators have continued his approach to collecting, and their scholarly contributions still inform the discipline of Asian art history.

In 2000, Freer and Sackler Galleries faced a claim asserting that the heirs of Rosa and Jakob Oppenheimer were the rightful owners of an ancient Chinese bronze vessel, a gui (Figure 1). The Freer acquired this bronze in 1938 from C. T. Loo, a well-known, internationally based art dealer. A significant addition to the collection, the bronze was included in the Gallery’s first catalogue of Chinese bronzes, published in 1946. The claim resolution was based on internal Smithsonian research among collection records, on information gained through collaboration with German and American colleagues who had experience with Oppenheimer/Burchard Nazi-era sales and auctions, and with newly available information at German and French archives. In 2002, the Smithsonian and the Oppenheimer heirs amicably agreed on a settlement, and the gui remains in the Freer and Sackler Galleries collection. However, questions still remain regarding the particulars of the object’s earlier history, including the details of its transfer from China to Europe before it entered the Oppenheimer/Burchard gallery sometime after 1934, and the circumstances of C. T. Loo’s acquisition. In light of this provenance matter, the Freer and Sackler Galleries have made it a priority to research all objects acquired from that dealer.

In 2009, to assist individuals and institutions in their research, Freer and Sackler Galleries published the first online workbook for museum methods for Asian art provenance research, “Guidelines and Procedures for World War II-Era Provenance Issues.” The website received 6,000 hits in its first sixteen months. SPRI provenance specialists also held two training workshops for Freer and Sackler Galleries staff, which led to presentations to the American Curators of Asian Art Forum. The curators’ enthusiastic support of this project led to a Freer and Sackler Galleries website; training sessions with the Freer and Sackler Galleries board of trustees, Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs agents, and the Department of State; and talks with the Smithsonian Resident Associates program.
The research of the last five years has resulted in a new project to start developing an Asian art web resource that will include biographies of collectors and dealers active in Europe during the critical period of 1933 to 1946, and will link those individuals and companies to specific objects in the Freer and Sackler Galleries collections. The web resource will also include inventories, exhibition catalogues, and other published materials that will assist in delineating the histories of Western collections of Asian art, and will provide insights into the business operations of dealers and auction houses, thereby assisting in tracking the movement of specific works.

**Shared Resources: Archives of American Art**

SPRI experts are working with the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art to highlight their rich holdings of provenance-related resources and materials. One of the most widely used resources on the history of visual arts and culture in America, the AAA stewards a growing collection of some 20 million letters, photographs, diaries, oral history interviews, sketches, scrapbooks, business records, and other documents. While Europe has many essential WWII-era provenance related resources, the Archives’ collections contain some of the most sought-after material in this area.

In 2012, the Archives received a Samuel H. Kress Foundation grant to create new web-searchable online finding aids for eleven archival collections central to provenance research. Detailed finding aids substantially enhance the information currently available to researchers on the Archives website: historical records of the Schaeffer Galleries and World House Galleries, and personal archives of art historians and World War II Monuments Men S. Lane Faison, Jr., Walter Horn, Thomas Carr Howe, James J. Rorimer, George Leslie Stout and Otto Wittman (Figure 2). Selections from each of these collections have already been digitized, as will the papers of New York City art dealers J.B. Neumann and Victor Spark.

This project supplements an earlier Kress Foundation grant to the Archives of American Art that supported the digitization of Jacques Seligmann & Co. records. One of the foremost French and American dealers in antiquities, paintings, and decorative arts, this gallery was among the first to promote contemporary European art. The company’s clients included major American and European collectors of the era, and many of the works that passed through its galleries have been donated to European and American museums.

**Scholarly Exchange, Collaborative Projects, and Training**

SPRI has initiated collaborations with individuals and institutions in the U.S. and abroad, and has participated in numerous symposia and roundtables in Vienna, Moscow, Zurich, and Munich and Berlin, that have published their proceedings. In May 2011, SPRI joined several institutions to invite colleagues to a two-day seminar
in Washington, D.C., that highlighted the progress of efforts to increase access to materials pertaining to cultural objects looted during World War II. 150 people attended, including 35 guest speakers and representatives from 60 museums, 34 U.S. states, and 10 European countries. The seminar demonstrated that coordination is key to avoiding duplication of efforts.17

SPRI also facilitates training for emerging provenance professionals in this exacting and often arcane “discipline” within art history and museum studies.18 We receive many internship requests from art history students and, in fact, three of them, after completing their graduate work in art history, have gone on to pursue law degrees with emphasis on cultural heritage law. However, the complex facets of expertise required in this field cannot be acquired during a single internship or week/semester long introductory course, but require advanced knowledge of art history, history, languages and cultures, as well as hands-on museum and collections experience.

**Conclusion**

SPRI is committed to increasing communication between individuals, institutions, and nations through all available channels, especially approaches that are new to
the field. The challenges of provenance research lie in reconstructing the past, and its difficulties are in interpreting that past. The essays in this Journal offer a glimpse into many different stories connected with collecting, selling, buying, lending and displaying art. They demonstrate that provenance research is not added to curatorial work, but is rather a critical part of the work itself and of museum collections stewardship. Its findings shed light on the power of art in everyday lives. Hopefully, factual information can remove some of the misperceptions that now cloud the public’s understanding of museum practices. Through on-going research, analysis, and interpretations of their collections—from varying perspectives—museums can engage the curiosity and enduring support of the public and donors.

Notes


2. Art journalist Lee Rosenbaum, in her July 16, 2013, CultureGrrl blog, “Repatriation and Restitution: Crimes of Omission in NY Times’ Cultural Property Coverage,” chides two New York Times reporters for irresponsibly having “omitted crucial facts bolstering museums’ cases for retention of two hot-button objects.” A controversy recently flared when Hashava, the Israeli restitution organization, issued a press release accusing the Israel Museum and several other museums in Israel of possessing Nazi-looted art. The organization soon had to backtrack because of its “tone,” and because its statement was misleading. Hashava later offered to help the museums secure the funds they need to perform adequate provenance research. See Jessica Steinberg, “Restitution group withdraws claims museums illegally holding looted art, wants to help,” The Times of Israel, January 26, 2014, http://www.timesofisrael.com/restitution-organization-museums-jostle-over-nazi-looted-art/.


5. Since 1999–2000, the Smithsonian administration has closely followed developments including the Washington Conference in 1998; the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States in 2000; the establishment of the AAM (American Association of Museums) Guidelines; and AAMD (American Association of Art Museum Directors) Guidelines concerning museum holdings which may have been unlawfully appropriated during the Nazi
era. In the “Smithsonian Institutions/SD 600 Collections Implementation Manual,” chapter 23, a section entitled “Specific Legal and Ethical Issues, Unlawful Appropriation of Objects during the Nazi Era,” the Smithsonian committed itself to a pan-institutional approach to provenance-related principles, policies, collecting and acquisition consideration standards, and transparency.

6. Since 2000, the Smithsonian’s central administration has financially supported provenance research historians to assist museum curators with their research and, in 2004, launched the “Smithsonian Institution World War II Provenance Web Site.” Aside from a searchable object database, the site includes resources and additional information on World War II era provenance issues, documentation, history, laws, policies, and research. See: Smithsonian Institution, “Provenance in the World War II Era, 1933–1945.” Last modified February 23, 2004, http://provenance.si.edu.


8. Since 2009, the Smithsonian’s Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) and the Office of International Relations (OIR), with the support of the U.S. Department of State’s Cultural Heritage Center (CHC) and the Department of Homeland Security’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) have organized eight training workshops for HSI agents. HSI agents investigate crimes involving the illicit importation and distribution of cultural property, art and antiques. CHC implements the US obligations with regard to the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Acting together with the Department of Justice and INTERPOL, these agencies slow and prevent the illicit trade of art and antiques as a means to protect and preserve cultural heritage.

9. Since 2008, the Smithsonian’s WWII-era provenance research projects are supported by Richard Kurin, Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture. He tasked me to direct the project as part of my role as Senior Program Officer for Art in the Office of the Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture (OUSHAC). Previously, the Smithsonian’s provenance research efforts were based out of the Office of the Under Secretary for Art, and supported by Edwin (Ned) Rifkin, former Under Secretary for Art, and Susan Talbott, former Director of Smithsonian Arts. Talbott recruited Laurie Stein, an art historian and former foundation director, to assess and report on the Freer/Sackler museums’ provenance project and to write a comprehensive plan for the museum. That report led to the founding of the Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative (SPRI). From 2008–2012, the following served as advisers to project: Julian Raby, The Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art; Martin Sullivan, Director of the National Portrait Gallery (emeritus); John W. Smith, Director, Archives of American Art (now director of the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design).

10. I would especially like to acknowledge the core team of the last five years: Elizabeth Duley, Head of Collections, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and project consultants Patricia Teter (2008–09), Provenance Advisor; Laurie A. Stein, Senior Provenance Advisor (2008 to the present); and Dorota Chudzicka, Provenance Research Associate (2008–2013), for their vision and contributions that have greatly contributed to the results of the SPRI projects. The latter two have also contributed essays to this journal.


13. At the Freer and Sackler Galleries, 275 art works with WWII-era provenance gaps have been researched and are available on the museum’s website with links to NEPIP. See The Freer


17. See May 2011 seminar website: Smithsonian Provenance Research Initiative. “World War II Provenance Research Seminar.” http://www2provenanceseminar.wordpress.com. Museum professionals and others interested in provenance learned about new electronic tools, collaborative projects, and strategies for research. The seminar opened with remarks by Jim Leach, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities, who discussed the reasons we are still dealing with WWII-era provenance questions 70 years later. Experts guided discussions about using new online resources, especially the web portal linking researchers to archival materials from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the German Bundesarchiv, and the National Archives of the United Kingdom, among other partners. See National Archives and Records Administration, “International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property,” last modified February 2014, http://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/international-resources. The launch of NARA’s Research Portal and the coinciding seminar are evidence that research exchange at the transatlantic level is happening. As of yet, however, only large national institutions have the available resources and infrastructure to engage in this type of international collaboration.

18. In addition to training Smithsonian staff, SPRI has participated in educational programs on provenance for UNESCO, the Association for Research into Crimes Against Art, the International Society of Art Appraisers, and the European Shoah Legacy Institute, as well as public lectures at museums and universities.