

SEIZING THE MOMENT:
DIGITIZING THE NAZI THEFT OF
EUROPEAN JEWISH CULTURE

ידיעוּת

JEWISH DIGITAL CULTURAL RECOVERY PROJECT

One of the most significant chapters of the genocide of European Jewry is one of the least known: The audacious looting campaign by the Nazis, their allies, and collaborators to rob European Jews of their cultural assets. Its main goal: the erasure of all traces of Jewish identity, history, and culture.

In 2019, the Claims Conference and the Commission on Art Recovery founded the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project (JDCRP) Foundation for two purposes: The creation of an open source, object-based database of all cultural objects looted from European Jewry by the Nazis and their allies, and the formation of a transnational network of experts and partner institutions.

This state-of-the-art digital project will help restore the depth and breadth of the Jewish contribution to European cultural history and illuminate a key phase in the development of modern European culture. Thus, the project will bring a small measure of justice to those who were so cruelly robbed of their lives, possessions, and identities.

As the generation of Holocaust survivors dwindles, objects provide a new avenue of entry to connect younger generations to Holocaust history. The JDCRP database will enable users to trace the journeys and tell the stories of the objects and their owners, infusing new life into their vanished worlds. It will recapture remembrances to tell the story of antisemitism past and present. It will document the objects and trace the stories of the culture, lives, and identities of their former owners, who were stripped of their possessions in the greatest cultural theft known in modern times.

The JDCRP database is the first central platform compiling rapidly disappearing archival information on the robbery of Jewish-owned cultural assets. Nothing of comparable scope exists. The foundation has a comprehensive agenda: documentation of relevant archives, research to give context and meaning to the documents, and educational material to highlight the scope and impact of the theft. It provides as well a much-needed global platform to link experts and institutions in the field.

SCOPE OF THE JDCRP DATABASE

Not surprisingly, the archival evidence of a theft of such unprecedented dimensions was hidden, scattered, or destroyed. Neglected evidence disappears every day. The documents chronicling the theft must be secured immediately, before it is too late, to prevent further erosion and disappearance.

The European Union is funding the project's pilot phase, an innovative, timeline-driven compilation of archival documents from the confiscated Adolphe Schloss collection of Dutch and Flemish Old Masters. The pilot project developed valuable digital technology architecture that will help establish a central database, enabling a virtual reconstruction of the large-scale looting of cultural heritage.

The JDCRP central platform will bring together archives that document the ownership, seizure, dispersion, and recovery efforts of Jewish-owned property. It will make available little-known information, such as tax records, shipping registers and restitution claims, to a broad public audience, improving the ability to cross-search archives to follow the journeys of the looted objects.

Remarkably little research exists on issues of Nazi looted cultural assets, with most research less than a decade old. The JDCRP platform will showcase pathbreaking research projects, such as a comprehensive catalogue of works by Jewish artists persecuted during the Holocaust. Such projects will illuminate the time and place in history of the Jewish and European worlds they reflect, demonstrating the immense Jewish contribution to European cultural heritage. Educational material based on archival sources will be developed, helping anchor the theft as an essential part of Holocaust education programs.

WHY WE NEED A CENTRAL DATABASE OF LOOTED CULTURAL OBJECTS

Many of the stolen objects remain missing but not forgotten. The JDCRP database will retrieve cultural memory and serve as a living virtual monument of the Nazi-led attempt to extinguish all vestiges of Jewish life. By compiling archival documentation, the JDCRP project can provide transparency and moral justice, recapturing vanished histories and reclaiming European Jewish fates from obscurity.

The JDCRP archival database helps rescue the Jewish contribution to pre-WWII European culture, deliver a comprehensive overview of the theft, and provide a template for other instances of cross-border cultural theft. The work of the JDCRP Foundation and its partner institutions makes a unique contribution to demonstrating the integral role of cultural plunder in genocide.

Contact:

Deidre Berger
Chair, Executive Board
deidre.berger@jdcrp.org
+49 177 8257593

Wesley Fisher
Member, Executive Board
wesley.fisher@jdcrp.org
+1 (215) 880-8517