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15 June 2009

### **Technology and the Accessibility of Information**

At the Washington Conference on Holocaust Era Assets, there was a breakout session that focused on the identification of art, archives and databases and which emphasised the role of technology. There was a great deal of excitement about being able to post information on the internet so that it would be accessible to everyone. Museums, archives and government agencies committed resources to making the information that they held available online. Many of these organisations succeeded at this and there are several websites that contain valuable information about Holocaust Era looted cultural property.

However, many of the websites have not been updated since they were first constructed in the late 1990s or the beginning of this century. Technology has come a long way in the last decade and new digital initiatives need to take advantage of this. This paper will provide a brief overview of what is currently available online, from early to more recently built websites; what information still needs to be made publicly available; and current digital projects that will be very useful for the restitution community. The second part of the paper will focus on the creation of a Central Information Portal.

An early example of a looted art database is the French MNR website. The MNR, or Musées Nationaux Récupération, database lists 2000 items that were looted from France, but the owners of the artworks are unknown, and the objects have been left in the custodianship of the French government. The website was launched in November 1996 and was the first online database to post looted art. At first, there was only a written description for each item, but the data improved to include provenance information and images.

Websites evolved from this early model to include sites that are more user friendly and contain free text searches, such as the Dutch Origins Unknown website. The project began in 1998 as an initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences and the site lists items from the Dutch NK collection, which, like the MNR site, shows objects held by the Dutch State, whose owners and heirs are unknown. Several items have been restituted since the website went online.

The Central Registry of Information on Looted Cultural Property 1933-1945 was launched in 2002 under the auspices of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. It contains an

object database and an information database which is a useful resource for finding laws, policies and archival information with regard to looted cultural property.

The German website [lostart.de](http://lostart.de), which is run by the Koordineirunsstelle in Magdeburg, contains missing items from families and objects looted from German institutions. It also contains objects housed in various institutions throughout Germany. Claimants can register missing items as well. Although the website was launched in 2000, it has been continually updated and includes useful research information such as a list of collectors and information on forced sales.

The search engines for all of these sites work fine, but technology has improved since they were first built and search engines have become more sophisticated. One example of this is the Trace Looted Art database, which was launched in 2006. Trace is a global, online registry of stolen valuables that is freely available to the public and its database contains over 45,000 looted items and allows free text searches. Claimants can register looted items as well. One of the most interesting features of Trace is its image matching technology, which allows comparison, search and retrieval of photographic images. The image search can enable matches even if images are at different angles and under different lighting conditions. This is very helpful if images of the same object differ slightly and if an artist's name is spelled differently or if an object has been reattributed.

There are many other websites that contain valuable information about looted cultural property, and the amount of data that has been published online makes finding information much easier than it was just a couple of years ago. However, there is still a great deal of valuable information that is not yet widely available.

Some of the key documents that would be very useful to the restitution community if they were digitised include dealer records and forced sale auction catalogues. Dealer records would be a tremendous resource when conducting research, and although lists of records are available it would be very useful if the actual records were placed online and made available to the public, especially prominent pre-war dealers such as Adolf Goupil and Paul Rosenberg . There are also hundreds of forced sale auction catalogues located in libraries throughout Europe that could be digitised. Sage Recovery has been working with the HCPO and other organisations to start digitising the records of notorious wartime auctions such as those run by Paul Graupe, Rudolph Lepke and Hans Lange.

Any time archival records are digitised and made publicly available, it is extremely useful. To that end, it is very exciting that the National Archives in Washington DC will be digitising their microfilmed records that relate to Holocaust Era Assets which should be available by the

middle of 2010. They have partnered with the British National Archives and the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, who are also working to digitise their records.

Another useful project is the digitisation of the ERR records which Patricia Grimstead is working on in conjunction with the Claims Conference. Also of note is that the Austrian Commission for Provenance Research are completing a database that will cover all auction catalogues from Vienna 1938 – 1944. The database is currently an internal tool for members of the Commission and it is not known if the database will be made public.

More information regarding Nazi looting is being published online all the time. This is a great thing, but it is difficult to keep track of everything that is available. One way to resolve this is to create a portal where visitors can retrieve information from participating websites.

An example of a web portal for looted cultural property is from the American Association of Museums, who launched the Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal (NEPIP) website in September 2003. The goal of the portal is to provide a searchable registry of works of art in US museums that changed hands in Europe from 1933 – 1945. The portal has over 150 participating museums with over 26,000 objects.

The portal is great way to bring together data from museums that have different standards for displaying information. The search results display basic information about the object. In order to obtain complete provenance information about an object, the user has to go to the actual museum website, and from there either navigate to the object or contact the museum, instead of linking directly to the page that the object is on.

There have not been any other portals specifically dealing with looted art, but there are some very impressive portals for art libraries and the cultural sector that have been launched in the last two years and show how quick and easy it is to search multiple websites. One example is the Virtual Catalogue for Art History, or [artlibraries.net](http://artlibraries.net), which is a European catalogue of art libraries. [Artlibraries.net](http://artlibraries.net) was launched in 2007, prior to that it was known as the VKK or Virtual Catalogue for Art History. [Artlibraries.net](http://artlibraries.net) contains access to more than 8 million records including books, periodicals, exhibition catalogues and conference papers.

[Artlibraries.net](http://artlibraries.net) simultaneously searches information from over two dozen online art libraries around the world. Results are listed by libraries with links to the titles of the books. Clicking on the link will take the user to the book reference on the originating library's website. This is very useful and saves the researcher a great deal of time. They don't have to search several library websites and could very likely find the information that they were looking for on a website that they did not even know existed, but is part of the [Artlibraries](http://artlibraries.net) network.

A relatively new portal is Europeana, whose prototype was launched at the end of 2008. Europeana is a website that searches over 2 million items from over 1000 cultural organisations from across Europe, including the Louvre, the Rijksmuseum and the British Library. It provides direct access to digitised archives, books, paintings, photos, manuscripts, and audio and video material. Participating cultural institutions are able to take advantage of Europeana's features, but still retain complete autonomy over their content.

With Europeana, visitors can carry out a single search from different collections in several European cultural institutions without having to visit multiple sites. The data is not stored on a central computer, but is culled from the member institutions' websites. A search yields an image and the name of the institute it came from. Searches can be refined by language, country, date, and provider. Clicking on an image will give the user basic information about the item, list related content, and provide a link to view the item in its original context, which gives complete details about the item on the provider's web site.

Europeana uses personalisation and web 2.0 features as well. A user can log in, save searches, tag searches, share information, and see what new content has been added. Europeana will soon be adding groups for visitors to join and discuss common interests. All of these features help to create a sense of community because a user can actively participate and share their thoughts and interests with visitors around the world.

These impressive portals were built within the last couple of years and were able to take advantage of the improvements in search technology. This kind of technology can be used to create a Central Information Portal for Holocaust Era looted cultural property. Washington Conference Principle VI states that 'Efforts should be made to establish a central registry of such information.' The best way to establish such a registry would be to create a portal for new and existing websites to join so that all sites could be searched in a single place.

It would have been difficult to have a discussion about this type of portal even five years ago because there were not the abundance of websites devoted to looted cultural property and search technology was not as well developed as it is today. But now that there are so many websites devoted to this subject, and the technology is available, the time is ripe to create a Central Information Portal for Holocaust Era looted cultural property.

I have helped to create two international databases, one for the Central Registry of Looted Cultural Property and one for Trace Looted Art, so I have a good understanding of the issues involved with creating a single universal database. I believe that a portal with member websites would be a better solution than putting all available information into one website. One

of the main issues when developing a single centralised website is that organisations have already spent time and effort creating websites, and not everyone is happy to put their information into another website since the data is already available and because they feel that it would be duplicating their efforts. In some cases, organisations are given funding specifically to carry out looted art digitisation projects and would not want the funding to be taken away from them by entering the information into a single website. It is extremely important to make information available in one place, especially now that there are so many sources for information.

Another issue is dealing with different standards from information providers and then collating them into a single standard. There are also different national laws about data protection, copyright and use of images. Creating a Central Information Portal is a nice way to get around these problems. As part of a portal, these issues will already have been dealt with by the member websites. The portal would cull basic information from each website and present it in a standardised way, but site and national standards will remain intact in the member websites.

A portal can be a way to display information from all available looted cultural property websites in one place without having to build an entirely new database. The portal does not need to be limited in the type of information that it displays. Organisations that have information about looted cultural property would be asked to become members of the portal, and when new sites are built, they would be invited to join the portal. The effort that existing websites would need to put forward to make their data work with the portal would be minimal, since the search technology on the portal would be able to draw out existing information. The portal would search information from relevant object oriented databases, museums that list provenance information, digital libraries and archives which have pertinent records, sites that list claimant information, restitution laws, and collector information.

The portal will not replace current websites with their unique features and services, but on the contrary, should render them more visible and efficient within an association of cooperating partners, particularly if a search query lists what website the information came from. The search results could be filtered in a variety of ways, including by object, provenance, collector, date, language, country and originating website. The portal could also list content related to a specific search as well as what the most common searches are, which would provide unique insight into what kind of information people are researching.

If object information from every site is displayed, then this will become a valuable tool for the art market. Dealers and auction houses can use the portal to search items before they go up for sale and catch items that may have been looted.

The portal can also feature social networking, which would be helpful for both families and professionals who are seeking information. Families could talk to one another about successes and pitfalls they have encountered. They could also form interest groups that range from genealogy to claimant resources. This would give them a community to discuss issues with likeminded individuals.

Another advantage of social networking is that professional researchers would have an international environment in which they can share information. Oftentimes research is solitary, but it is much more useful if a researcher could get tips from other professionals in the field. Users could form specialist groups such as restitution laws, looting in Poland, etc. This could have a knock-on effect of creating an international restitution community that can communicate on a regular basis in which anyone is welcome to participate.

In terms of governance, the Central Information Portal should be run as a not-for-profit organisation and be a neutral body, so that there are not any conflicts of interest with claimants or the art market. A small staff would be needed to manage the build and maintenance of the site. This could be run in conjunction with the proposed Terezin Institute.

As a not-for-profit organisation, funding could come from governments or from private foundations. The way that the portal is built, the lists of partners, and the way that it obtains information should be entirely transparent and the organisation running the portal should publish regular reports about the information that it had acquired, highlights and statistics about how many people are visiting the website, and the organisations that are sponsoring the site.

There will be issues that arise when creating a portal, the biggest one being securing and sustaining funding. However, this is a great way to centralise information while also letting participating organisations retain autonomy and control over their content. Creating a portal specifically for Holocaust Era looted cultural property will fulfill Washington Conference Principle VI and make finding information much easier and more accessible.