

**25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES ON
NAZI-CONFISCATED ART: BEST PRACTICES & THE WAY FORWARD**

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Remarks

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Twenty-five years ago, in a very different world, over 40 countries endorsed the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. It was the beginning of a journey that has impacted the way that we look at issues of ownership, history, and transparency in the world of art and cultural property. But the journey is not yet completed.

Today, we take stock of progress, and at the same time we chart new directions forward.

In 2021, a beautiful leather-bound book dating from the 19th century that had belonged to the Jewish community in Oradea in today's Romania came up for auction at a New York auction house. A page of that book in elegant handwriting listed the names of those who passed away. One of them is described simply as Tova Esther, the daughter of Leah, who passed away on the 5th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev. How did this precious book reach New York in 2021? What other paintings, books and ritual kiddish cups that tell the story of a family and represent the history of a people remain today behind closed doors and in private homes?

Our attention tends to be drawn to high profile cases of paintings by luminaries like Picasso and Schiele hanging in storied museums across the world – art that is of tremendous historic symbolism.

But this is also a story of drawings, of sculptures, of musical instruments, of libraries, of torah scrolls and of shofars. It is about items that are sometimes of limited financial value but of immeasurable historical meaning to families and to the Jewish people. For every renowned masterpiece that was taken during the Holocaust, there are also hundreds of lesser-known works and religious items. They came from great cities, from small towns, and from tiny villages. Some were created by people whose famous names roll off our tongues, and others by anonymous craft workers toiling in obscurity in their studios.

Why do they matter? Because they bring us closer to lives that were destroyed and to memories that were lost. They represent the heart of a family, the heritage of a community, the soul of a people. They tell us where we came from and who we are.

As we are increasingly discovering, artwork and items that belonged to families and to Jewish communities before the Holocaust are not just in great museums around the world; many also ended up in private homes.

The records relating to the private art market can hold the key to unlocking the past. Privacy is a value we all share, but so too is the quest for justice.

As a global report by the World Jewish Restitution Organization and the Claims Conference released today shows, we have seen great progress over the past 25 years, but there is clearly much to do.

- Most countries have done at least some historical research, so that we know better how the looting of cultural property was carried out.
- Provenance research has grown greatly and has become much more advanced, partly as the result of greater access to archives and the effect of digitization. However, museums in many countries continue to ignore the need for provenance research, and in most countries, it is not seen as an essential part of museum practice.
- Claims processes are now in place in many countries, but the numbers of cases handled and resulting restitutions often remain low. Five countries have established restitution commissions to facilitate claims, but the overwhelming majority of countries still do not have one.
- Although the Washington Conference Principles were intended to cover more than just public collections, there has been far less progress related to items that are currently in private hands. There remains much to do with regard to provenance research, transparency of records and facilitation of claims for these items.
- There is now greater awareness of the special status of cultural property that belonged to Jewish communities, but in many cases, property still remains with private individuals rather than being part of the heritage of the Jewish people.

Overall, our report found that, of the 47 countries that endorsed the Terezin Declaration, which incorporated the Washington Principles, seven (7) countries have made major progress; three (3) countries have made substantial progress; thirteen (13) countries have made some progress, and twenty-four (24) countries have so far made little or no progress.

Under the leadership of the United States, countries have come together today to endorse a set of Best Practices.

These Best Practices can guide us forward. They represent an international consensus on how we can and must do better - they are a road map for the future.

We thank so many of you who have engaged in this effort to understand the past and to seek justice today for families and for communities.

We urge other countries, as well as museums, auction houses, dealers and private possessors to join us in ensuring that rightful owners and their heirs and the Jewish people are reunited with their cultural treasures.

At a time when we as a society are increasingly examining the origins of items of art and culture, this is a moment that calls for us to shed light on one of the darker chapters of our past.

The memory of Tova Esther, the daughter of Leah, who passed away on the 5th day of the month of Kislev recorded in that beautiful leather-bound book belongs to her family, and to the Jewish people.

Today is not only about the restitution of property; it is also about the restitution of history.
