

RETROPOLIS

Many countries lag in returning art looted by Nazis, report finds

Russia, others have done little to investigate items stolen from Jewish owners during World War II



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Twenty-four countries have done little or nothing in recent years to investigate and return looted art and artifacts stolen by the Nazis from Jewish owners during World War II, [according to a report](#) released Tuesday.

The report, by the World Jewish Restitution Organization and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, says countries such as Russia, Romania, Spain, Denmark and Turkey have made little or no progress in trying to restore looted art to its original owners or heirs in the last 25 years.

The countries are among more than 40 that in 1998 endorsed the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, which aimed to promote the restitution of art and cultural artifacts seized from Jewish owners during the Holocaust.

“It has been estimated that over 100,000 ... paintings, and many more ... books, manuscripts, ritual religious items, and other cultural objects stolen during the Holocaust have never been returned,” the report states.

In the case of Russia, not only has Moscow lagged in its efforts, but amid its war on Ukraine, “a growing body of evidence suggests Russian forces are systematically stealing art and cultural artifacts from Ukraine on a scale not seen in Europe since the Nazi plunder of World War II,” the report states.

The report, “Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Property: A Current Worldwide Overview,” was unveiled during a conference at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The gathering was convened by the U.S. State Department and the World Jewish Restitution Organization.

“The Holocaust was not only the largest genocide in history, it was also one of the largest mass thefts in history,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in video address to the gathering.

“The Nazis plundered museums, galleries, homes and Jewish communities,” he said. “My late stepfather, Samuel Pizar, was one of the victims.”

Pizar’s mother had her engagement ring seized by a German soldier just before she was herded onto a train bound for the concentration camp at Treblinka, where she was killed, he said.

“For decades, the international community knew little about the injustice of Nazi-looted possessions,” he said. “Looted art hung in galleries and homes, without challenge. The Washington principles ... began to change that.”

Seven countries, including the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany, have made major progress implementing the Washington principles, the report says.

In the last six months in the United States, 10 works by the Austrian artist Egon Schiele have been returned to the family of Fritz Grünbaum, an Austrian-Jewish cabaret performer who perished in the Dachau concentration camp in 1941, according to the Manhattan district attorney’s office.

Grünbaum’s art collection was seized by the Nazis, and some of his pieces later wound up in American museums and collections.

Germany has returned, or provided compensation for, thousands of objects and books since endorsing the Washington principles, the report says.

But Pablo Picasso’s 1903 portrait “Madame Soler,” which is claimed by the family of collector Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, remains in Germany’s Bavarian State Painting Collection, and the Bavarian government does not consider it looted art, the report says.

The report added that three countries — Canada, Israel and Switzerland — have made substantial progress, and 13 countries have made some progress.

The conference attendees also unveiled a list of nonbinding best practices for the future pursuit of Nazi-looted art and artifacts. The best practices have been endorsed by 22 countries.

The practices include increased emphasis on research into the history of ownership, and the recommendation that current possessors not seek repayment from the prewar owners or their heirs for the purchase price of the Nazi art in their collections.

