

Report Says Museums Post Less Online About Possibly Nazi-Looted Art

Researchers for the World Jewish Restitution Organization said families whose art was stolen or disappeared in the Holocaust now face a harder time tracking works on the internet.



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Sept. 25, 2025, 11:00 a.m. ET

Most American museums are not providing adequate online information about the ownership history of artworks in their collections, handicapping efforts by potential claimants to track family treasures looted in the Nazi era, the World Jewish Restitution Organization says in a new report.

Until last year, the American Alliance of Museums operated a portal on which U.S. museums had listed almost 30,000 works with Holocaust-era provenance gaps. But after managing it for 21 years, the alliance shut down the portal last year.

Today, the restitution organization said its researchers had scoured the internet and found that readily accessible online information is available for only 10,668 such works that are now listed in data sets maintained by individual museums, not a central inventory.

“We urge American museums to do more — to open their records, invest in provenance research, and ensure that Holocaust survivors and their families have the information they need to pursue justice,” said Gideon Taylor, the president of the restitution organization.

“This report highlights the urgent need to prioritize transparency, research and accountability when it comes to Holocaust-era looted art,” said Taylor, whose organization was founded to advocate the return of Jewish property in Europe.

The United States emerged as a key market for art from Europe during and after World War II — including many paintings looted by the Nazis and sold to American dealers. The restitution organization estimates that the number of artworks in U.S. museums that could have been looted by the Nazis is “well over” 100,000.

That figure is based on responses to a 2006 survey of American museums conducted by the restitution organization and the Jewish Claims Conference. The survey identified artworks created before 1946 and acquired by a museum after 1932 that underwent a change of ownership between 1932 and 1946 and might reasonably be assumed to have been in Europe between those dates.

The museum alliance has argued that the portal became obsolete as museums began to create their own online databases. Around 90 percent of its listed works had been added before 2009, said Natanya Khashan, a spokeswoman for the alliance. After that, she said, museums “did not necessarily see the portal as their primary platform for sharing this information.”

“When the portal was initially launched, it filled a critical gap by aggregating provenance data from a wide range of institutions,” Khashan wrote in response to emailed questions. “Over time, as digital infrastructure improved and museums began expanding their own online collections, the landscape shifted.”

But the restitution organization said it found that of the 160 museums that had listed works on the portal, only 33 continue to present online inventories of objects potentially looted by the Nazis — among them, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The rest either do not list provenance information online at all or they list ownership histories for many works, but do not specifically devote pages to items that have problematic gaps as to who owned them and when.

Nicholas O'Donnell, a lawyer who often represents restitution claimants, said he thinks, overall, museums are doing more to address the issue of whether they are holding works that might have been looted.

“The trend is still upwards,” he said. “The number of museums with dedicated staff for provenance research is on the increase. The overall commitment is significantly higher than it was 30 years ago.”

The Art Institute of Chicago, a museum that had listed items on the portal, said that it does not provide a separate list for works with problematic provenances, like MoMA. But the museum said it is working to ensure that its entire database contains detailed information about the ownership history of items in its collection for researchers to review.

“Our objective is to publish the known provenance of every single object in our collection,” said Jacques Schuhmacher, executive director of provenance at the museum. “Given the size of our collection, about 300,000 objects, this is an enormous undertaking and takes significant time and resources, but we are making consistent progress.”



This silver medal recognizing skill in marksmanship was crafted in 1537. It is among the items listed online by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston to be transparent about artworks in its collection that may have been lost because of Nazi persecution. The museum says it is still researching unresolved questions about the work's history. via Frederick Brown Fund and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Toledo Museum of Art, which had placed items on the portal, said it hopes to create searchable database of its entire collection but does not have a page dedicated to flag the items it had once listed. Doreen Cutway, a spokeswoman for the museum, said it is working toward the goal of “ensuring that object-level provenance information is easily accessible and searchable on our website.” Currently, the museum’s website does not list provenance information for works beyond the details of how the museum acquired the work.

The now discontinued portal was established in 2003 in response to the 1998 Washington Principles — international guidelines on handling Nazi-looted art and provenance research in museum collections. The principles included a call to “publicize art that is found to have been confiscated by the Nazis and not subsequently restituted” and “to establish a central registry of such information.”

Taylor said one virtue of the alliance’s portal had been that it served as a one-stop inventory of works with issues, and relieved families of the task of searching museum by museum for leads.

Marc Masurovsky, a founder of the Holocaust Art Restitution Project, said the number of items listed on the alliance’s portal may have been inflated initially by institutions that sent through some works that do not appear to have had ownership gaps. Still, he said he viewed the loss of the portal as a missed opportunity.

“It was a good start,” he said. “They could have jazzed it up. But instead it became a digital artifact.”

Taylor said he is worried that since the Washington Principles were endorsed 27 years ago, American museums’ commitment to them is dwindling.

He said he hopes the restitution organization’s latest findings on online provenance research “will spur action on the part of museums.”

“It’s about good governance,” he said. “Museums should show the public what they have and where they got it.”
