



The Central Depot for Confiscated Art in Vienna

The securing of Jewish art collections was one of the National Socialists' aims and it was systematically implemented after the Anschluss in March 1938. Under reference to the Export Prohibition Law of 1918, the Central Office for the Protection of Monuments was able to request the securing of art collections considered under threat of being taken abroad. Curators of public collections who had given expert advice to private collectors before the Anschluss used the knowledge gained to repeatedly provide information about significant works to the Gestapo in order to facilitate their confiscation. Collectors who, according to the National Socialists, had turned against the German ethnic community had their collections expropriated. In carrying out these seizures, the Gestapo liked to use the expert support of art historians of the national museums in Vienna and other provincial states of Austria.[1]

During the first months after the Anschluss, the Gestapo stored confiscated art objects in various locations in Vienna. In the autumn of 1938 the Central Depot for confiscated artwork was established in the Neue Burg, which is part of the Imperial Palace in Vienna. By the autumn of 1939, nearly 10,000 objects of art had been accumulated in its rooms. With the assistance of the Museum of Art History, all seized artwork was supposed to be gathered, inventoried and placed under conservatorial care. The Museum of Art History hoped to be allocated some of the major items of the confiscated collections following its professional care of the holdings. [2]

Since the summer of 1938, all confiscated works had been placed under the Führer's prerogative[3] Adolf Hitler, who visited the Central Depot in the Neue Burg on October 25, 1938, thus secured his priority access to the most outstanding pieces to fill the planned Führer Museum in Linz.[4] The Central Office for the Protection of Monuments distributed artwork not earmarked for Linz to Austrian museums which had presented long wish lists. Shortly after the beginning of the war, the storage of the artwork away from population centers was initiated for fear of air-raid damage. Like the collections of the major museums, the stocks of the Central Depot were relocated, via different stop over points, to abandoned monasteries and expropriated castles and, from 1943, to the tunnels of the Altaussee in Styria and Lauffen salt mines in Upper Austria.[5] After the end of World War Two, the restitution of confiscated works was handled by the Central Art Collecting Point in Munich.[6]

[1] Haupt H, *Jahre der Gefährdung. Das Kunsthistorische Museum 1938 – 1945*, Vienna, 1995, at 16 (quoted hereafter as: Haupt, *Jahre der Gefährdung*).

[2] Ibid, at 17ff.

[3] Decree issued by the Reich Minister and Head of the Chancellery of the Reich, June 18, 1938. Archive of the Federal Office for the Protection of Monuments Vienna (BDA). Restitution files, box 8/1, fascicle 1. As facsimile in: Theodor Brückler (publ.), *Kunstraub, Kunstbergung und Restitution in Österreich 1938 bis heute*, Vienna-Cologne-Weimar, 1999, at 157.

[4] Haupt, *Jahre der Gefährdung*, at 17ff.

[5] Ibid, at 19.

[6] Sailer G, *Rückbringung und Rückgabe: 1945 – 1966*, in: Theodor Brückler (publ.), *Kunstraub, Kunstbergung und Restitution in Österreich 1938 bis heute*, Vienna-Cologne-Weimar, 1999, at 31ff.