



Gabriele Anderl, Alexandra Caruso, eds. *NS-Kunstraub in Ö–sterreich und die Folgen*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 313 pp. EUR 33.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7065-1956-4.

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Stolen Lady in Gold

This engrossing and deeply disturbing volume has its origins in the Austrian Contemporary History Conference in Salzburg of 2003. At that time, and when the book went to press, Gustav Klimt’s “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I” (1907) was hanging in the Austrian Gallery of the Belvedere in Vienna. No longer. In 2004 Bloch-Bauer’s niece and heir, Maria Altmann, persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court that she could sue the Austrian government for return of the picture. It had been wrongfully expropriated during National Socialist rule in Austria (when it was retitled “Lady in Gold”) and, under the terms of Austrian legislation introduced in 1998, was bound to be returned to its rightful owner. The Austrian government decided it would not attempt to purchase the work back from Altmann, and it was duly sent to California, where it was displayed for a time in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In June 2006, “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I” became (at least for the time being) the most expensive picture ever sold at auction, when it fetched a reported sum of \$135 million. The buyer, Ronald Lauder of the cosmetics dynasty, then put it on display in his Fifth Avenue Neue Galerie in New York.

The dispute between Altmann and Vienna is alluded to in Gabriele Anderl’s and Alexandra Caruso’s introduction to their edited collection of essays on Nazi art theft in Austria. The fact that this particular instance has subsequently been resolved in such a spectacular fashion, appropriate to such a spectacular painting, gives even more allure to an already strong story. Eighteen contributors—from a variety of backgrounds in history,

art history, curatorship and journalism—provide copious details of provenance and personalities, in relation to an overall deeply sordid tale of opportunism, greed, hypocrisy, willful obfuscation and murder. Despite the legislation of 1998, many issues remain difficult and controversial, not least because prominent institutions find their past and present practices under fire. One such, the Dorotheum auction house in Vienna and elsewhere, features repeatedly in the chapters in this book, but—as the editors explain—two contributions dealing specifically with it have had to be omitted. One was never submitted in final form and one was withdrawn at the last moment, apparently due to legal considerations.

The basic subject matter of the book is the expropriation of art and related collections of Austrian Jews from 1938 to 1945, and subsequent difficulties experienced by the owners or their heirs in receiving any restitution or compensation from postwar Austrian institutions and authorities. These themes go to the heart of both the general question about restitution and the righting of past wrongs (the Elgin marbles make a brief appearance), and of the specific debate about how far the second Austrian republic has ever properly come to terms with the National Socialist past. However, even with the best will in the world (rarely evidenced in this story), matters were frequently complicated. Essays by Gabriele Anderl and Walter Schuster, for instance, discuss art dealers of Jewish origin who were themselves allegedly involved in the circulation of stolen artworks. Who were here the perpetrators and who the victims? The very terms “stolen” or

“theft” (or the even stronger *Raub* in German) are themselves subject to close scrutiny in the book, in the context of expropriation, which was in many—though by no means all—cases sanctioned by new laws. Similarly, the perennial defense of purchase “in good faith” is also debated. Furthermore, some of the impediments to the export of artworks during the Third Reich and afterwards had nothing to do with the National Socialists. They derived from legislation to protect the patrimony in 1918 and 1923. Many of the appraisers, dealers and museum directors (roles which overlapped in far too many cases for propriety) argued that they had been safeguarding the property of dispossessed Jews and helping them to escape. After all, they knew them and their collections very well before 1938. In his contribution to the volume, Ingo Zechner provides some salutary reflections upon the contested meanings of property, restitution and individual and collective memory. He also notes importantly that the art collectors of Vienna—Jewish or otherwise—were small in number, and that most Jewish families that suffered expropriation and worse never came near the old masters.

The richness of the material cannot be conveyed in full here, but there is no doubt that this title is a substantial contribution to the literature on National Socialist art plundering, to be read alongside the works of, for example, Jonathan Petropoulos, Lynn H. Nicholas, Hector Feliciano and Stephanie Barron.[1] The great service done here is to highlight the Austrian, particularly the Viennese, dimension, and at the same time to link it with developments in Berlin and Paris, and with the 1939 sell-off of modern art in Lucerne. Birgit Kirchmayr’s discussion is of the “Sonderauftrag Linz,” headed initially by Hans Posse of Dresden, to furnish the planned FÄ¼hrer Museum. Within Austria, Linz was chosen explicitly in order to counterbalance the cultural wealth of Vienna, and the project was also intended to stock up the collections of other provincial Austrian cities. As Kirchmayr points out, the FÄ¼hrer Museum ended up with plenty of money, plenty of pictures and what amounted to a director and a catalogue; it just never existed as a museum! Sabine Loitfellner draws to our attention the “Vugesta” (Verwaltungsstelle fÄ¼r jÄ¼disches Umzugsgut der Geheimen Staatspolizei, or Administrative Office for Jewish Removal Effects of the Secret State Police). This body operated largely in a private business capacity, through the good offices of the removals firms. They notified the authorities of what Jewish refugees had left behind for sending on, and it was pored over by all the players in this unseemly game. Even before such a stage

was reached, of course, many collectors had been approached with financial offers well below previous market values.

Monika Mayer devotes considerable attention to the notorious Bruno Grimschitz, who headed up the Austrian Gallery at the Belvedere, alongside his many other roles. He also appears in many of the other case studies. These include: discussion of the Albin Egger-Lienz collection, still to be seen today; the dubious activities of the scion of the eminent Gurlitt family, Wolfgang Gurlitt; the relentless pursuit of justice by Victor Blum, seeking recovery of his medieval panels; the value for provenance research of the technicalities of inscriptions and labels on the reverse of canvases and picture frames; and the plundering of libraries. Many complex individual histories are recounted in vivid and ultimately depressing detail.

The book does give three grounds for concern. The first is that the individual essays, dealing as they do with interlocking material, repeat it constantly. Considering the crucial importance of the “Sonderauftrag Linz,” the Dorotheum, the “Vugesta,” and various museums, galleries and pieces of legislation, it would have been helpful to have had a summary narrative and glossary at the outset. Instead, all the elements appear over and over again within the detailed case studies, which themselves follow no very obvious order. In one instance, exactly the same quotation about Egon Schiele (Grimschitz’s view that the artist was pessimistic but not degenerate) appears on page 68 and again on page 98.

Secondly, the essays differ markedly in character and length. Some are full and thoroughly documented academic papers, while others appear almost in shorthand form, simply listing details. Gabriele Anderl’s own piece, a very interesting study of several individuals involved in the Viennese art trade, does not come to a conclusion. It simply stops, at a point near the end of the career of one of them, Eugen Primavesi. The ending of the volume as a whole is similarly abrupt. The final contribution is a useful if brief reference to the website www.lostart.de, but that is then that, as though it is enough to bring the story up-to-date without any concluding observations.

The third problem is rather different. It has to do with the implicitly indignant moral tone employed more or less throughout. Maybe in this particular Austrian context, an element of rhetoric is appropriate or even necessary. After all, one of the most disturbing aspects of the history is the way in which individuals and institutions have over the decades tried to wriggle out of their responsibilities. Nonetheless, the choices of epithets used

to convey outrage become rather wearing. Accurate accounting of the sometimes horribly simple and sometimes very complex events would surely be sufficient to convey the injustices and the cruelties. This issue is all the more important because, as many of the authors are at pains to point out, some of the situations were personally and morally very complicated.

Despite these caveats, the volume is to be highly commended. As the invaluable endnotes testify, it derives from a great deal of detailed research in the archives of Austrian institutions not renowned for their openness. The individual essays recount stories interesting not only from a local or an Austrian perspective, but also with much broader questions about the Third Reich and the international art world in mind.

Note

[1]. Jonathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (London: Allen Lane, 2000); Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Borzoi Books, 1994); Hector Feliciano, *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Stephanie Barron, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles Museum of Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1991); Stephanie Barron, ed., *Exiles+emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

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