Challenges in provenance research and art restitution (Vienna, 30 Nov–1 Dec 26)

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Nov 30–Dec 1, 2026
Deadline: Mar 31, 2026

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Challenges in provenance research and art restitution today and tomorrow. Dealing with Nazi-era loss and spoliation of cultural assets in the second quarter of the 21st century.

The signing of the Washington Declaration in 1998 marked the beginning of a new phase in the examination of the Nazi era – in particular, the confiscation of art and cultural assets as a result of Nazi persecution. At the same time, it marked the starting point for the establishment of a new field of research: systematic provenance research focusing on the period between 1933 and 1945.
Almost three decades later, provenance research has evolved internationally in terms of methodology, institutions, and theoretic approaches, shaped by national conditions. Today, it is firmly established in museums and collections as a practice-oriented field focused on the restitution of art and cultural objects confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution—including the subsequent research into their heirs—and as an independent, transdisciplinary field of research in the university context. The field increasingly relies on international cooperation, digitization, and methodological innovations in order to enhance research and to document both the transnational dislocation histories of objects and the individual life stories of their former owners as well as those involved in the confiscation of art and cultural property.
In recent years, provenance research has increasingly intersected with other contexts of injustice, including colonialism, Soviet Occupation Zone/GDR, and is subject to public demand. The examination of (global) power relations, (historical) appropriation processes, and (structural) inequalities broadens provenance research in both its content and its methodological approaches.
As a result, provenance research has not only gained scientific relevance and public visibility, but is subject of debates in context of cultural and memory politics. At the same time, however, significant structural, institutional, and political differences still persist, reflecting historical developments of individual countries.
At the beginning of the second quarter of the 21st century and on the occasion of Austria's chairmanship of the European Network of Restitution Committees on Nazi-looted Art, the Commission for Provenance Research will host a conference in Vienna on November 30 and December 1, 2026. The conference aims to discuss and compare recent developments, (trans)national perspectives, methodological approaches, and future challenges in provenance research and restitution. The following topics will be addressed:

1. Politics, law, provenance research, and restitution
• How do the different legal, administrative, and financing systems as well as ownership struc-

tures in each country influence provenance research and, subsequently, restitution?
• Are non-binding regulatory systems such as the Washington Principles (still) sufficient/effective today?
• What research and action guidelines developed in Nazi-era provenance research can be applied to other contexts of injustice (e.g., colonial or SOZ contexts), and how can this field contribute to history more broadly?
• What political/economic impact does the temporal distance from the crimes of the Nazi regime in the third/fourth generation and more than eight decades after the end of the war have on provenance research today?

2. Society, memory, provenance research, and restitution
• What role do provenance research and restitution play in the political debate on memory and the past with regard to the Nazi regime?
• Against the backdrop of current/new geopolitical challenges and crises, how can provenance research contribute to a critical culture of remembrance and commemoration?
• What significance does it have in museum education and how is it perceived by the public?
• How do provenance research and restitution influence the art market?

3. Challenges, debates, strategies, and opportunities: the future or the end of provenance research and restitution?
• How can effective cross-border cooperation between the various actors be achieved and ensured?
• What formats are suitable for making research results visible, documenting them in a sustainable manner, and making them accessible for shared use?
• How do researchers and decision-makers deal with gaps in the sources, and what methods and strategies have been developed/proven effective in solving cases?
• What insights can historical research in general gain from the results of provenance research?

Organizational details
On the afternoon of November 30, 2026, members of the Austrian Commission for Provenance Research will hold themed workshops at selected museums in Vienna (details on content and registration will follow at a later date).
The conference, which will take place on December 1, 2026, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, targets experts and academics across all relevant disciplines.
The panel contributions are intended as 10-15-minute presentations in person. The written contributions (in English or German) will be published in a peer-reviewed anthology in the Commission for Provenance Research's series of publications.

Please send proposals for conference contributions (max. 250 words) with a title and a short biographical sketch (max. 100 words) by email with the subject line “CFP Challenges in provenance research and art restitution 2026” to provenienzforschung@bda.gv.at by March 31, 2026.

Successful applicants will be notified by early May 2026.
The conference language is English.
Travel expenses cannot be covered.

Date:

Workshops: November 30, 2026, 2:00 p.m.–6:00 p.m.
Conference: December 1, 2026, 9:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.
Conference venue: Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna
Organizer: Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media, and Sport / Commission for Provenance Research

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