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A conversation with Nancy Yeide, head of the department for “Curatorial Records” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington

Nancy Yeide assembled the first comprehensive catalog raisonne of Hermann Göring’s art collection: he snatched up many more paintings than known until now.

Ms Yeide, you present us a book in which you describe all paintings which have formerly been in Göring’s collection including their provenance and their current whereabouts. How did this project get underway?

It emerged from my work as provenance researcher here at the National Gallery of Art. When I started to research the post-war history of a number of our paintings in the collection and started to go through records especially at the National Archives, I had to find out that there was no comprehensive catalog raisonne available. In the beginning I only wanted to help my colleagues in other museums and institutions, who did not have access to these documents, but the project assumed larger proportions over time. I was more and more interested in taking this project one step further and researching Göring’s collection as a whole.

And you started doing this seven years ago?

That’s about right, yes. It was not the only task I had to fulfill, but the National Gallery granted me one entire research year, during which I focused on nothing else.

Which were your most important sources? Where did you find things?

In American and German archives. The national Archives here in Washington keep, as you know, the most important documents in regards to the post-war situation, and in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz I have seen files concerning research done by the German side after the war. Furthermore I used archives in The Hague, London, Paris and traditional art historical source collections like the Getty Center or the library of the National Gallery. All this was very time and travel intensive.

But wasn't there a first attempt made in 1945 to draw up a list of Göring's art collection?

The list compiled in 1945 only mentions the works confiscated by the Allies. Afterwards a number of renowned research projects went on their way, on which I could base my work over and over again. I really learned to appreciate the effort put into these research projects. But there was no inventory compiled before the war. There is a sort of inventory from about 1940, but it is actually only a collection of papers, which somehow found their way into a file. And there are unfinished lists of paintings evacuated from Carinhall in 1945, and other lists of confiscated works. I had to filter all this and come up with, what I believe, has to be seen as a definite comprehensive list.

What were the main obstacles for you?

They were problems, which occur with every provenance research and every time one works with archive material. Documents were contradicting each other and the titles of paintings were different or contradicting, so that on occasion the same work was listed under different titles or attributed to different artists, not to mention wrong measurements. The research itself was of course also not the easiest because it had to be conducted everywhere around the world.

You also describe in your book how Göring's collection was formed.

Yes, this is a very important part of the provenance research. The book deals with the collection as a whole, and readers can find visual information on how it was put together, as if they were in a gallery. Furthermore there is a very substantial catalog part, describing the provenances and archival sources of each single painting. If there is one thing for me to regret, it would be that I did not have enough time to even go further. But time was scarce and so there is still some work to be done for future researcher.

Is there, in your opinion, any continuity in the collection?

No, I could not detect any. It was a very eclectic collection. The main bulk is German and Dutch Old Masters, followed by a number of French and Italian paintings, and amongst the German is a limited number of contemporary works of the period.

Göring was meant to have a taste for Nudes?

There are many Nudes, yes, but there were many Nudes in art history. That did not surprise me.

Who helped Göring to collect those paintings?

He had a number of employees, even in Paris, and there were curators and technical personnel organizing transport. He did not lack helpers.

What happened to the collection at the end of the war?

Göring had his collection evacuated from Carinhall, his main residence near Berlin, where most of it was housed. It is quite a complicated story, but in short, the main part of the collection, 90% according to later estimates, was confiscated by American Armed Forces near Berchtesgaden. And a bit got lost on the way, but these paintings are the ones on which I cannot give any more information. But I do hope that this book will pave the way for more information to be unearthed.

How many paintings were there in your opinion?

Based on the lists compiled in Berchtesgaden, one formerly thought there to have been about thirteen hundred paintings. I would now very conservatively estimate the collection to have been more in the region of eighteen or nineteen hundred. I have compiled the book like a catalog raisonné, with a group of objects clear of any doubts, and a small group, on which I am pretty certain with a few questions remaining, that I was unable to eliminate. Then there is a group, which I, different from other scholars, do not count in. So an exact number is difficult to determine.

But these are only paintings?

I have only focused on the paintings. But he also had sculpture, arms, prints, drawings, coins, tapestries. Somebody else has to deal with those.

How about paintings sold by Göring. Did he not part with two works by Matisse and Van Gogh's Portrait of Dr. Gachet?

He acquired the Van Gogh during the campaign initiated by German museums against "degenerate art". But I also included paintings confiscated by Göring in France and used as payment, which had not found their way into Göring's collection. He for instance traded ten Impressionists for a Cranach he wanted to have. I have listed all paintings he owned for a certain period of time and considered part of his collection, even if he sold them off later on or traded them in for other paintings. So in my book you can find one fake Vermeer, for which he gave more than one hundred Old Masters.

Is there still room for surprises after your comprehensive research?

Maybe a few insignificant ones. But I do expect to find out much more about paintings mentioned in the book. Other people might see things I have not seen. But I do not believe there to be many paintings I have overlooked.

Which role will the book play in terms of restitution of art?

I hope it will serve as a resource. But we should remember that each object has its own individual history that has to be researched most thoroughly, before it could lead to a restitution based on my research. I only supply a basis on which other people can build.

The interview was conducted by Jordan Mejias

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Göring's prey

Why Nancy Yeide's book matters to restitution

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He considered himself a "Renaissance Man" when it came to his art collection. By that he did not only want to point out his preference for Lucas Cranach, who he paid almost exclusive homage to at the beginning of his collecting activities. During the 1930s his art historical scope was even broader. Even though Old Masters of German and Dutch origin were forming the basis of his collection, he made space for Italian and French art of the 18th and 19th century in his galleries at his country estate Carinhall. Amongst the exhibited treasures were works by Grünewald and Cranach, Tiepolo's "Alexander the Great and Campaspe in the Studio of Apelles" (now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), Jan Gossaert's "Virgin and child" (now in the Art Institute of Chicago), and four Boucher's which he looted from the Rothschilds (now in the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth).

Contemporary Art, which he gained possession of by confiscating Jewish property, he exchanged for paintings of his liking. "Pianist and chess player" by Matisse (now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington) he handed over for a mythical nude by the less significant Jan van Neck. Van Gogh's portrait of Dr. Gachet, which was taken from the Städel (Museum) in Frankfurt, and "Madame Camus" by Degas he was equally happy to part with. His pride and joy was a Vermeer, which came from the workshop of the art forger Han van Meegeren. Göring let go of more than 100 Old Masters in return.

The bulk of Göring's collection, assembled by plunder, acquisition, exchanges and bestowal by solicitants who he supplied with wish lists, was evacuated from Carinhall at the beginning of 1945. On special trains (Sonderzügen) the works made their way to Berchtesgaden via Veldenstein castle, his Franconian estate. Here they were safeguarded by the American Armed Forces. Göring himself was arrested at castle Fischhorn at Zell am See. Carinhall he had blow up. Still in Berchtesgaden a first list of his collection was being compiled, before it was taken to the Central Collection Point in Munich, and in parts photographically documented. The collection was being estimated at about 1300 paintings back then, which also contained sculpture, arms, furniture, porcelain, ceramics, tapestries.

Nancy Yeide, provenance researcher and head of the department for “Curatorial Records” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, is now presenting much higher numbers. During her seven year research, during which she concentrated entirely on the paintings and tirelessly combed through archives on both sides of the Atlantic, she found out that Göring possessed an additional five to six hundred paintings. Some of those were looted from the trains, some were found by German authorities after the Allies closed the Central Collection Point in 1950, some were traded or sold by Göring before the end of the war.

Widely unknown is for instance the fact that next to “Dr. Gachet” he owned another flower still life by Van Gogh and a “Saint Barbara” by Cranach, a portrait which, according to Nancy Yeide has never been published anywhere else before. “Beyond the Dreams of Avarice: The Hermann Goering Collection”, a handsome volume, which is due to be published by Laurel Publishing at the beginning of April, will be the first publication, as Nancy Yeide phrases it carefully, which offers an almost comprehensive documentation of the collection, including paintings which only temporarily were in Göring’s possession.

In the future one or the other paintings, which Yeide did not account for, might still resurface, but she does not count on any huge surprises. But surprises might be possible for individuals in possession of a painting in her book finding out, that it once hung in Carinhall. Because even today Yeide is unable to determine the current whereabouts of a number of paintings, whose provenance until the day of their incorporation into Göring’s collection has now been determined. She does hope though, that especially through the publication of her catalog raisonne a number of mysteries might be solved. Nancy Yeide does not only provide new resources to scholars who can now dare to evaluate the collection as a whole, “Beyond the Dreams of Avarice” could also very well cause new restitution claims.

Jordan Mejias