

THE FRICK COLLECTION

MEMBERS' MAGAZINE SPRING / SUMMER 2001

COVER IMAGE:

Workshop of Peter van den Hecke,
detail of *The Arrival of Dancers at
the Wedding of Camacho*, c. 1725–50,
wool and silk

PHOTO BY RICHARD DI LIBERTO



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THE FRICK ART REFERENCE LIBRARY HELPS SOLVE PROVENANCE RESEARCH MYSTERIES



RICHARD DI LIBERTO

Online Sources for World War II–Era Provenance Research

For bibliography information, visit
www.frick.org/html/provenancebib.htm

For Internet resources, visit
www.frick.org/html/provenancelinks.htm

TOP:

A selection of Paris exhibition pamphlets from the 1920s and 1930s along with an example of one of the Library's "faux catalogues," consisting of a typed checklist and newspaper reviews, for a 1943 exhibition at Wildenstein Gallery in New York.

Like most literary and historical pursuits, art history research can be subject to trends and changes in taste. Rarely, though, is it subject to a sense of urgency or justice. This became the case, however, when last November the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States—with the full agreement of the directors and administrators of major museums—charged a full investigation of the previous ownership and transfer of title for all works of art given to or purchased by American public collections after 1933. Since then, the spotlight has shone on a particular area of art history research known as *provenance*.

Provenance is the history of a work of art's ownership, tracing it from its present location and owner back to the artist's

studio. In response to the Commission's mandate, many institutions have hired staff dedicated to provenance research, and have organized colloquia for curators and independent researchers to share their findings and methodology. Once this research has been completed, museum curators and administrators will not only breathe easier about their own collections, but will also find comfort in knowing that works of art borrowed for special exhibitions will not be subject to unexpected claims. (In one case, a work under question was seized by customs officials while en route to a traveling exhibition and has been tied up in legal battles ever since.)

The Frick Art Reference Library, with its vast holdings of World War II–era catalogues and other resources, is recognized by specialists in the United States and Europe as indispensable for documenting the provenance of paintings, drawings, and sculpture possibly stolen or looted in occupied Europe during World War II. Among the Library's most helpful resources for establishing a work's provenance are its holdings of rare, so-called ephemeral exhibition pamphlets from Jewish art dealers whose collections were looted in Paris in 1940; information documented in the Library's Photoarchive about privately owned works of art; and scarce wartime auction sale catalogues from Switzerland and France. The Library also contains "faux catalogues" from exhibitions for which catalogues were never published. Striving always for full documentation of gallery and museum exhibitions, the Library staff during the late 1930s and 1940s copied the label information on site, then assem-

bled the data along with newspaper reviews and commentaries into individual “booklets.” Researchers can consult these resources in combination with more conventional research tools such as catalogues raisonnés, private collection catalogues, and Internet and CD-ROM databases including the Getty Provenance Indexes and the computer file on Stolen Works of Art maintained by Interpol (International Criminal Police Organization). The Library staff also has developed “finding-aids,” all available on the Frick website, that point to important bibliographic and Internet resources for provenance research.

A particularly successful example of provenance research conducted at the Frick Art Reference Library recently led to the restitution of an important painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder to the family of its rightful owner, a victim of Nazi looting. The mystery was solved by Dr. Evie Joselow,

then working for the Commission for Art Recovery, whose research at the Library took her from monographs and collection catalogues about Cranach’s work to documentation of the painting in the Photoarchive to the Witt Library microfiche. On the basis of Dr. Joselow’s findings and with the cooperation of the Holocaust Claims Processing Office of the New York State Banking Department, the North Carolina Museum of Art—which had acquired the painting in good faith, with no knowledge of its regrettable history during the war—returned the painting to the family of the rightful owner. The painting was then re-acquired by the museum through a combined purchase and gift of the owner’s family and reinstalled there last September.

Provenance research is undeniably one of the most difficult areas of art research, requiring painstaking sifting of visual, archival, and circumstantial material, aided by the occasional lucky break or serendipitous discovery. In a paradoxical way, serendipity is made possible for researchers at the Frick by the systematic way in which the Library staff gathers and cares for even the smallest, seemingly insignificant shred of visual or documentary evidence that might reveal where a work of art has been.—*Inge Reist*



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553),
Madonna and Child in a Landscape, c. 1518,
oil on panel,
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

LEFT:

Anna Swinbourne, a curatorial assistant at The Museum of Modern Art, conducts ongoing provenance research at the Library for MoMA’s Department of Painting and Sculpture. Here she is assisted by Irene Avens, Head of Reference Services.

