

ONLINE CARD INDEX OF THE CENTRAL DEPOT FOR CONFISCATED COLLECTIONS IN VIENNA

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Abstract

Established in autumn 1938, the Central Depot for Confiscated Collections on the bel étage of the Neue Burg in the centre of Vienna contained several thousand objects from Viennese art collections, which were confiscated by the Nazis from their Jewish owners after March 1938 and later given to various museums. Until July 1940 the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna managed the Central Depot. Thereafter, until the depot's closure, the Institute for Monument Protection, the present-day Austrian Federal Monuments Authority (BDA) was in charge. Both institutions used file cards to catalogue the looted art objects.

In order to make these sources publicly available for browsing and full text search, we have scanned and transliterated the sources and added them to the general KHM database. This digital inventory works as the backend database for the website. For the provenance research community we have created an access level where they can add related information. Relevant additional information will be gradually added to the public website.

The December 2017 online card index aims at building historical awareness and making provenance research in Austria more visible.

Link: <http://www.zdk-online.org/>

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1. The Central Depot file cards

1.1 The project

The online publication of the Central Depot file cards (<https://www.zdk-online.org>) is a cooperation between the Commission for Provenance Research at the Federal Chancellery (BKA) in Austria, the Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM) in Vienna and the Austrian Federal Monuments Authority (BDA). The project was developed and implemented by the KHM and the Commission for Provenance Research. The KHM (<http://www.khm.at>), whose collections date back to the Habsburgs and whose international reputation makes further introduction unnecessary, has its own archive in which one of the sets of Central Depot file cards is kept. The BDA (<https://bda.gv.at>), the Austrian monuments authority, has made the second set in its archive available for the project. The Commission for Provenance Research (<http://www.provenienzforschung.gv.at>) manages and evaluates the BDA's restitution material. It was established in 1998 to conduct systematic research in Austrian federal museums and collections to determine whether they (still) possessed objects that had become the property of the state after having been confiscated by the Nazis. The restitution material is of central significance for provenance research, as it provides information about the seizure, confiscation, safekeeping and return of objects, photos and personal information about confiscations, and other official measures during the

Nazi era. It is for this very reason that the file cards from the Central Depot are so interesting as they provide documentation about thousands of confiscated items from various private art collections.

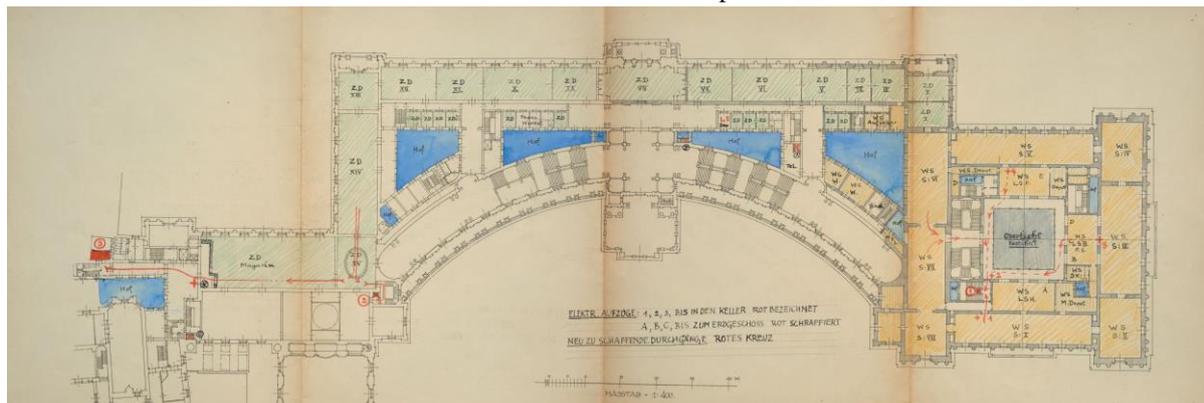


Fig. 1: Plan of the Central Depot, August 1939 (©KHM)

The aim of this online card index is to provide researchers and other interested persons with the possibility of conducting parallel searches on Nazi looted art stored physically in two related sources at two different institutions in Vienna. Apart from preserving the original analogue source material, the online edition of the Central Depot file cards provides more convenient access to these sources, with a view to stimulating further research, for example on the history of the institutions or the whereabouts of the objects restituted after 1945, some of which are untraceable today. At the same time, the project is intended to draw active and critical attention to local Nazi history.

One of the first visible results of the online card index was the discovery of a watercolour, *Peasant Girl with Spade*, by August Xaver von Pettenkofen, which had been in the Albertina's Graphic Arts Collection since 1963 without the previous owners having been identified. In the Central Depot file the watercolour was listed with the title *Farmworker*, but its provenance was tracked down on the basis of photos (https://www.zdk-online.org/k/LR_850). At the eighty-ninth Advisory Board meeting on 15 June 2018, a recommendation was made in accordance with Section 3 of the Federal Law on the Restitution of Art Objects that the object be returned to the legal successors of Louis Rothschild (http://www.provenienzforschung.gv.at/beiratsbeschluesse/Rothschild_Louis_2018-06-15.pdf).

1.2 History

As mentioned, the Central Depot was established in autumn 1938 (Haupt, Pichorner, 2009) to provide a central location for the storage of art and arts and crafts objects from private Viennese art collections confiscated from their Jewish owners by the Nazi regime. The depot was established by the numismatist Fritz Dworschak, who had been promoted to become temporary head of the KHM and whose idea it was to bring together in one place all of the art and cultural objects stored until then in different places (Haupt 1995). Walter Stahlecker, head of the Vienna Security Police, ultimately acceded to Dworschak's repeated request, and the Central Depot was established at the KHM's expense on the first floor of the Neue Burg, part of the Hofburg in the centre of Vienna (Haupt 1995). The Central Depot stored works of art, some installed in the rooms and some packed in crates, from the collections of Emmi Aldor, Bernhard Altmann, Alois Bauer, Leo Fürst, David Goldmann, Rudolf Gutmann, Felix Haas, Felix Kornfeld, Moritz Kuffner, Wally Kulka, Otto Pick, Pilzer (first name currently unknown), Valentin Viktor Rosenfeld, Alphonse Rothschild, Louis Rothschild and Alfons Thorsch, along with objects of unknown origin. Under the direction of Leopold Ruprecht, director of the Weapons Collection at the KHM, and with the assistance of other state museums such as the Albertina (Heinrich Leporini) and the Staatliches Kunstgewerbemuseum, now the MAK (Ignaz Schlosser), the inventory was catalogued, the objects photographed and a Central Depot file system created (Haupt 1995).

The power of disposal of the stored objects rested with Adolf Hitler, pursuant to the “Führervorbehalt” (reserved for the Führer) order of 18 June 1938, a copy of which was contained in the “1938 documents” in box 8 of the BDA archive restitution material “Seizure, confiscation, distribution: general”. Hans Posse, Hitler’s special representative responsible for establishing an art museum in Linz, selected the objects from the Depot destined for this planned museum (Schwarz 2018). The remaining objects were then dispersed among interested museums in Vienna, but also in Innsbruck, Graz, Salzburg and Linz. As the BDA restitution material in box 8 shows, the museums created long lists with a view to obtaining particular works of art and appealed against negative decisions on the grounds of discrimination and ill-treatment.

In 1940 by order of the Reich Chancellery, Friedrich Plattner, State Commissar for Schools, Culture and National Education, stripped the KHM of its authority and, in a letter of 18 June 1940, also in the documents on the provincial government in 1940 in box 8, entrusted the monuments authority with this responsibility. Dworschak objected to this treatment in a letter to Posse of 19 July 1940, to be found among the documents on the Central Depot in 1940 in the KHM archive file: “Hier hat uns Staatskommissar Plattner, der nun endgültig ausgeschieden ist, im letzten Augenblick noch einen Hieb versetzt und das gesamte, vom Kh. [Kunsthistorischen] Museum aus eigener Initiative in den ersten Monaten nach dem Anschluss zusammengetragene Material (Neue Burg) verwaltungsmäßig dem Denkmalamte, entgegen meinem Vorschlag, zugewiesen.” (“Contrary to my recommendation, State Commissar Plattner, who has now left this position, has administered one final blow, giving responsibility for the material collected (Neue Burg) by the Kunsthistorisches Museum on its very own initiative in the first months after the Anschluss to the monuments authority.”)

The first objects from the Central Depot were already removed for safekeeping at the start of the war, and in mid-1941 the Depot was gradually emptied and the objects dispatched to other places, such as the closed Kremsmünster Abbey in Upper Austria (Brückler, 1999). When the Neue Burg was visited on 5 May 1945, remnants of the Central Depot were still found, as documented in an eight-page list of objects in the KHM archive.

1.3 File cards

As mentioned, the institutions formerly responsible both have sets of file cards, and there is also a catalogue of confiscated objects. The archives of both institutions have copies of the catalogue. The KHM copy is annotated and has also been digitised so that the annotations can be consulted online.

The file cards contain different types of information: the owner of the collection, of course, like LR for Louis Rothschild, and the name and description of the object. This information was cut out of the catalogue of confiscated objects item by item and glued onto the file cards, as can be seen in the illustration. There are also a few cards created later, on which the object and its description are typed, as they were not listed in the catalogue, which was printed in 1939. The KHM and BDA file cards do not completely match, but present the information available to the administering institutions.

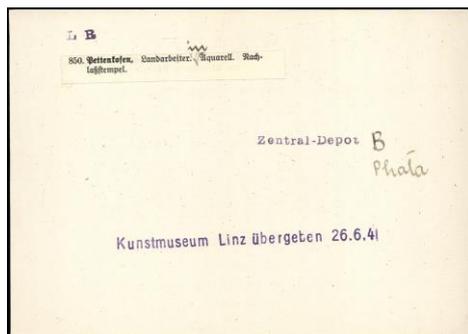


Fig. 2: Central Depot card, LR 850 (©KHM)



Fig. 3: Central Depot card, LR 850 (©BDA)



Fig. 4: Photo Julius Scherb

Both cards here show where the objects were stored, although the information on the KHM card (fig. 2) has not yet been completely deciphered. This card has a reference as well to a photo of the watercolour. The photo (fig. 4) is today in the BDA file. The KHM file card (fig. 2) also indicates that the object was intended for the Art Museum in Linz. It is thought that the date refers to the removal to Kremsmünster Abbey.

The BDA file system was continued after 1945, hence references to the year 1947 (fig. 3) concerning a document in the BDA archive and to a donation to the Albertina Graphic Art Collection. The back of the photo also has writing on it and the photographer's stamp. The amount of information varies from card to card.

Paul Frankenstein and Julius Scherb, the photographers commissioned by Ruprecht, have been identified from invoices in 1939 in the KHM archive material and through the stamps on the back of the photos. The material on Reichsstatthalterei III (Governor's Office III) of 1939 in the Austrian State Archive indicates that the costs were financed through the "sale of inferior and Jewish works from a collection not administered by the Central Depot." The reference is to objects from the former Ephrussi family collection.

2. How to connect two institutions

2.1 Digitisation

An online edition was thought to be the best option for making the file card sources accessible to as many people as possible. At the same time, we wanted to create a structure that would permit easier navigation through the large number of file cards and also full-text searches. For this purpose a system had to be created in the backend database reflecting the complexity of the situation and capable of being adopted for the online edition.

First of all the sources were digitised. There was a catalogue and just under 12,000 file cards, around 5,900 from the KHM and 5,600 from the BDA. The KHM administered the cards in its archive according to its own system, collating written documentation on the subject of provenance research in Object Group XIII. The boxes with the file cards were sequentially numbered and the file cards arranged in them by object groups such as paintings, sculptures and furniture.

In the BDA, however, the file cards were arranged by person, according to the collections from which the objects originated. The task was then to retain these two classifications, because the two institutions were still internally processing some of the objects. Every file card nevertheless had initials indicating the original collection. This and a serial number made it possible to devise a classification system that could be used for both sets of file cards.

The scanning of the cards was outsourced to a specialist company, which scanned the front and back of the cards in the respective arrangement system and returned them intact to the boxes. A separate folder was created for each box of file cards. Excel lists were then created in cooperation with a company in India. In the left-hand column were the original serial numbers of the scans. In the right-hand column the initials and numbers were entered. This process could not be automated because there were many handwritten or illegible numbers. Some of the numbers were in fact completely illegible. These were marked accordingly and corrected afterwards by us. The error rate was very small and could be quickly dealt with.

In the next step the scanned files were automatically renamed. Before we could compile datasets in the KHM object database, however, we had to decide how to deal with the BDA file cards. To that end, a section in the KHM object database was established for objects not from the museum, so as to make it clear that the BDA file cards were not part of the KHM inventory but could nevertheless be processed by the KHM. This also had to be reflected in the inventory numbering so as to avoid redundancy and duplicate numbers in the database. For these two reasons, the acronym BDA was incorporated in the inventory number. Then the datasets were

established. The final difficulty was to decide how much information to include in the inventory number. It should clearly indicate which collection the file card belonged to (AR = archive), the object group (XIII = provenance research), the project (ZDK = Central Depot files), whether it was from the BDA inventory (BDA) and what number it had there (e.g. GU 123 = Rudolf Gutmann), corresponding to the name on the card.

The scans were given names corresponding to the inventory numbers. The front and back were scanned and given subordinate numbers starting with the front, with an uneven number, and then the back, with an even number. The names of photo files thus indicated which side of the card it was. Some file cards had photos of the objects attached. As the file card was the determining factor for the project, the photographs were given subordinate numbers.

The next step was to link the file cards in the database. It was thought useful also to enter and link non-existent or lost file cards as “virtual entries”. This ensured that no file cards were forgotten, since gaps are also valuable as information. If the file card were to turn up in the future, it could be easily integrated into the system. A link was also created between the file card and the corresponding page in the catalogue. This has the advantage that it is possible to determine with one click which objects were documented together. This completed the skeleton framework. The next job was to fill it with content.

The catalogue of confiscated objects had already been transcribed, structured and transformed into a list for another project, and all of the information from the catalogue could therefore be entered into the backend database on the basis of initials and numbers. There were also countless handwritten comments and stamps on the file cards. The work of categorising these entries was entrusted to a “Zivildienstler” (person performing community service instead of compulsory Austrian military service), who entered all of these comments and stamp information into the database. Here again the error rate was very small. This provided the basis for discussion with the company with whom we planned the website.

2.2 Website

The website concept involved a number of considerations: the fact that there was one set of file cards in the KHM and another in the BDA also needed to be visualised; the information should be easy to consult; and it should also be easily accessible for the website operator to enable it to be updated and modified. A special consideration was the nature of the website as a platform for exchange with international provenance researchers. For that purpose a blog level for registered users was included. The reason for this is that after their confiscation in Vienna, objects were dispersed far and wide. Many were incorporated into museum collections. During the Second World War from 1939 to 1945 some of the objects were put in safekeeping. From there they were transported by the Americans to central collection points, in Munich, for example. Some objects were restored after 1945 to their original owners or their heirs and in some cases donated to other museums. The objects were registered at each of these moves and sometimes given new inventory numbers. Other objects, by contrast, have been lost without trace.

If members of the provenance research community have information about an object, they can enter it in the password-protected blog area. This information is then checked and possibly made visible as additional information on the website. As the website is intended as a source edition, care has been taken that the additional information is separate so as to ensure that the comments and source are not confused. The website provides access for administrators to enable additional information to be re-imported at any time into the backend database. This will prevent such information from being lost. Even if financing of the website by the Commission for Provenance Research is no longer available in future, access to the information will remain intact.

Some objects have recommendations from the Advisory board, which are also publicly available on the website of the Commission for Provenance Research. In these cases, hyperlinks are provided to the recommendations in question. There are also hyperlinks to the websites of other institutions where the objects appear. To enable individual cards to be cited, there is a permalink, or permeable URL, for each dataset or pair

of cards. The ability to cross-reference websites is another aim of the project, with a view to making the complicated history of some of the objects more transparent. This aspect has already proved to be useful. Early this year, as mentioned, a watercolour sketch in the Albertina's Graphic Arts Collection originally belonging to Louis Rothschild was identified by the museum's provenance researcher with the aid of the online card index, and a recommendation from the Advisory Board has already been made for restitution to the legal successors.

The last step for the time being was the launch of an English version of the website, naturally only the accompanying texts and menu. As translation also involves interpretation, the German source texts remain visible. Translation of the additional information is not possible for financial and organisational reasons.

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