

The Mosse Art Research Initiative (MARI)

Project: Berliner Mäzenatentum. Die Kunstsammlung Rudolf Mosse (1843–1920). Aufbau–Bedeutung–Verlust.

First Funding Phase: March 1, 2017–Feb. 28, 2019

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Goals and Central Issues

This project is dedicated to the art collection of the German-Jewish publisher Rudolph Mosse, which has until now not been researched in terms of its significance and make up. At issue first of all is the identification of the individual works and the reconstruction of the collection as a whole, which was purported to consist of several thousand works. Building upon this, questions are posed as to the whereabouts of the works, their individual stations along the way and paths taken until their current location in order to clarify the precise way in which the works were lost under Nazi rule. Parallel to research on individual works and closely related to this, the emergence of the collection in the context of the period is being researched along with the circumstances surrounding the persecution of the Mosse family and the mechanisms of confiscation triggered by the Nazi system. The findings will show the entire extent of the consequences resulting from the dissolution of the collection and provide points of departure for research on the system of profiting from confiscated cultural goods and their paths of distribution in the early phase of the Hitler regime. The results of both approaches, research on provenance and context, contribute in their relational structure of significance to the general investigation of Nazi crimes and furthermore serve to honor the life's work of Rudolf Mosse, a key art patron and philanthropist.

Prior History and Works Already Restituted

After the end of the Second World War, as part of the West German laws on reparation and compensation Felicia Lachmann-Mosse made claims on her lost property. At the end of 1954, Berlin's Kammergericht confirmed the loss of control over her private assets in April 1933. But she was forced to withdraw claims to the art collection auctioned in 1934, since the necessary investigations could not be implemented. Mosse real estate located in the newly founded GDR outside the scope of the federal Law remained unaffected. It was only after German reunification that the heirs of Felicia and Hans Lachmann-Mosse were able to apply for restitution on the basis of the Gesetz zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen (VermG, or Act on the Regulation of Open Property Issues). In November 1992, the lost property of the Lachmann-Mosse family was recognized as assets lost due to Nazi persecution (VermG Section 1 Clause 6). As a result, the heirs were returned their property. A good two decades later, the Mosse Foundation began the search for artworks from the former collection in collaboration with the Mosse Art Restitution Project (MARP) and the law firm RAUE LLP. Since then, around 20 objects and/or work groups have been found and most of them restituted in the spirit of the Washington Principles.

Project Structure and Method of Approach

Unlike most provenance research projects in public institutions, the works are not actually physically available in order to investigate their biographies. The MARI team is thus faced with the complex challenge of first having to find out what works were acquired by Rudolf Mosse and then lost due to Nazi confiscation. The foundational sources—catalogues of the works on display at Mosse-Palais, auction catalogues, and correspondence—cover only around 1/10 of the estimated extent of the collection. The lack of comprehensive inventories, precise descriptions of works and photographs, and the various scenarios that led to a loss of the collection and the transfer of the objects compound the difficulty of the research still further. To be able to research the extensive collection in the narrowly defined timeframe of the project on all aspects, research is being done on several levels. In the framework of seminars at the Art History Department, FU Berlin students are doing systematic basis research on objects in the collection, and the MARI team can use this as the starting point for more in-depth research. Goal-oriented coordination provides involved researchers with the necessary network of experts, making the Art History Department at the FU Berlin with its global orientation an ideal base for such a broad research project.

Cooperation Partners

An important new element of the MARI team is the inclusion of cooperation partners from various institutions. First of all, this involves collaboration with the heirs of Rudolf Mosse, who have guaranteed free access to all archival material in the family's possession. Other partners include the directors and employees of the museums and archives that are linked to the Mosse case, those affected by restitution claims and/or have already restituted works or hold relevant archival materials. They also work with the Berlin team as partners in conversation and have declared their readiness to communicate their knowledge of individual works from the Rudolf Mosse collection and their paths of loss to MARI. In return, the MARI researchers have been given access to the museums with their collected expertise. In future, every institution where works from the former Mosse Collection are discovered will have the opportunity to become a cooperation partner for MARI and to have the provenances of their works researched by MARI. This is also true of private collectors if they are prepared to acknowledge the validity of the Washington Principles for the handling of their own works. This collaboration is intended to aid communication among partners that provide insights into various points of view, to be able to achieve better solutions that are accepted by all parties in future. It is important to emphasize that MARI is not a restitution project, but a research project: priority is placed on the generation of knowledge and its transfer. Restitution claims negotiations take place outside the project to preserve the neutrality required for productive internal communication.

MARI Online Portal

One important means for bundling resources, findings, and experience is the MARI Online Portal. As a linking element among the cooperation partners, it serves the purpose of the digital presentation, exploration, and visualization of research results. In so doing, MARI relies on the use and further development of Open Source Modules. The modules custom-made for provenance research provide an interface for existing data sources (cooperation partners and norm data). They enable the preparation of existing data and newly generated data according to the principles of the semantic web and present research results in a way that fosters new findings.

MARI would like to make the material prepared and findings generated accessible to the very different target groups of provenance research: museums and archives, historical researchers, law firms, and those interested among the general public in various forms of examination adequate to each group. Despite the complexity of the information provided, the Internet presence is intended to be inviting and welcoming to a wide audience while also representing an efficient and comprehensive tool for researchers. To insure both, a newly developed usability concept is the basis of the publication.

Success Statistics During the first half of MARI's funding phase, profound results have already been achieved. Despite limited funding with just two half-time positions, the work is exponentiated in the framework of planned, coordinated network research. Within a year, research has been done on 115 works, for 68 works reliable evidence has been found, 30 were published at MARI Online Portal as it opened, 24 have been clearly identified, eight of them located. The context research that is being conducted in parallel has a recursive effect on the extent and quality of the results. Key findings have been made on the acquisition strategies of Rudolf Mosse and Hans Lachmann-Mosse (almost nothing had been known of the latter's acquisition practice until now). The preparation of a floor plan and front elevation for the Mosse-Palais, and the reconstruction of renovations and repeated rehangings also fosters knowledge and thus the identification of individual works. Former erroneous assumptions about the economic collapse of the publishing empire before 1933 could be corrected, the complicated dismantling of the Mosse-Company by the Nazis could be reconstructed in detail. New sources have been found of the art collection in 1933 and the auction in 1934. While MARI Online Portal informs all target groups in a comprehensive way, detailed research results are reserved for the planned conferences and book publications. But already now, the Mosse Art Research Initiative has proven to be one of the most successful provenance research project of its kind.

Kammergericht Berlin, Beschluss vom 11. Dezember 1954, quoted in: Bescheid über die Rückübertragung der Eigentumsrechte an einem Grundstück (Restitution) nach dem Gesetz zur Regelung offener Vermögensfragen in der Fassung des 2. VermRÄndG vom 14. Juli 1992 (BGBl. I Nr. 33 S. 1257) – VermG –, 11. November 1992, BVA Reg. Akte 26363, S. 4.

Protokoll der öffentlichen Sitzung vom 18. Januar 1960, BVA 82 WGA 3956/51, Bl. 122.

VermG BGBl. I p. 2591, Sept. 29, 1990.