

Accreditation Commission Statement on Best Practice:

Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi-Era

Approved April 5, 2006¹

Accreditation standards are set forth by the AAM Accreditation Commission in the *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum*, and elaborated in a series of *Expectation* statements. Standards are generally accepted levels of attainment that all museums in accreditation are expected to meet, and to which all museums should aspire. In addition to these standards statements, the Commission occasionally issues statements that codify best practices (commendable actions and philosophies that successfully solve problems, can be replicated, and demonstrate an awareness of standards).

These statements are intended to

- Provide guidance to the field as a whole on appropriate ways to approach a given issue, based on the Commission's observations of the hundreds of high-performing museums in the Accreditation Program
- Help museums in the accreditation program understand the Commission's thinking on issues that may arise in a museum's review

These statements generally address complex issues that museums may approach appropriately in a variety of ways, depending on their mission, values, discipline, and other individual circumstances. They are not standards, and do not set forth criteria that all accredited museums, or museums in general, are expected to meet. The Commission does feel that museums will benefit from considering how the issues discussed in this statement affect their operations and, as appropriate, using this information to make decisions regarding their own institutional practices, policies, and procedures.

Public awareness of the extent to which cultural property was unlawfully appropriated during the Nazi era is greater than ever. Though much of the property was recovered and returned, or its owners compensated, there is still material unaccounted for. Therefore, the museum community strives to identify this material in order that restitution may be made.

Because they hold their collections in trust for the public it is important for museums to identify this material. Stewardship of collections "carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal," as articulated in the AAM *Code of Ethics for Museums*. The Accreditation Commission views the issue of unlawful appropriation of objects during the Nazi era as one of high significance for all museums.

Museums participating in the Accreditation Program are directed to the *Guidelines Concerning the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era*, developed in 1999 by a joint working group appointed by the AAM Board of Directors and AAM/ICOM Board.

These guidelines acknowledge the complexity and many facets of the issue, including:

- proof of ownership and establishment of provenance, and
- competing interests and resolving the status of an object;

and also outline procedures regarding:

- Acquisitions
- Loans
- Existing Collections
- Claims of Ownership
- Fiduciary Obligations

Museums are also directed to *AAM Recommended Procedures for Providing Information to the Public about Objects Transferred in Europe During the Nazi Era*, formulated pursuant to an agreement reached in October 2000 between AAM, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States (PCHA).

Museums are encouraged to register and participate in the Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal (NEPIP). This web site (www.nepip.org) provides a searchable registry of objects in US museum collections that were created before 1946 and changed hands in Continental Europe during the Nazi era (1933-1945). By participating in the Portal, museums that have such objects in their collections fulfill their responsibility under the *Guidelines and Recommended Procedures* adopted by the museum field to make Nazi-era provenance information accessible.

Resources

- *AAM Recommended Procedures for Providing Information to the Public about Objects Transferred in Europe During the Nazi Era*, (American Association of Museums, 2001). Available free at www.aam-us.org/museumresources/prov/procedures.cfm.
- *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum and Accreditation Commission Expectations*, (American Association of Museums, 2005). Available free at www.aam-us.org/museumresources/accred/standards.cfm.
- *Code of Ethics for Museums*, (American Association of Museums, 2000). Available free at www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm.
- *Guidelines Concerning the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era*, (American Association of Museums, 2000). Available free at www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/nazi_guidelines.cfm.
- *Report of the Association of Art Museum Directors Task Force on the Looting of Art During the Nazi/World War II Era*, (Association of Art Museum Directors, 1998). Available free at www.aamd.org/papers/guideln.php.
- Find more Nazi Era Provenance information and resources at www.aam-us.org/museumresources/prov/index.cfm.

¹ Originally issued by the AAM Accreditation Commission November 10, 2000 as "Position Statement on Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era."

