

The Gurlitt bequest

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The most prominent Swiss case of recent years concerns Bern. In 2012 German customs and prosecutors found a large collection of works in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, son of the art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt, who had worked for the National Socialist regime in the sale of "degenerate art" and in acquisitions for the planned Führermuseum. Cornelius Gurlitt died in May 2014 and left his collection to the Kunstmuseum Bern. In November 2014 the museum accepted the bequest after concluding an agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany and the Free State of Bavaria. Under this agreement, works suspected of being looted remain in Germany for provenance research and are restituted if the suspicion is confirmed.¹

The Bern museum later adopted a policy of declining works whose provenance could not be clarified, and in 2023 it announced that it would renounce a further group of works with unresolved histories. The case has influenced Swiss museum practice as a whole. It demonstrated that a public institution can accept a burdened collection only if it undertakes systematic research and accepts the possibility of returning works. For the private art trade, Gurlitt became a reminder that works from collections assembled between 1933 and 1945 require particular scrutiny, whatever their present location.²

1 Notes

1. On the Gurlitt bequest to the Kunstmuseum Bern, the death of Cornelius Gurlitt on 6 May 2014 and the agreement of 24 November 2014 between the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Free State of Bavaria, see the publications of the Kunstmuseum Bern and the German Lost Art Foundation. To be verified. ↩

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2. On the provenance policy of the Kunstmuseum Bern for the Gurlitt collection and its announcements of 2023, see the publications of the museum. Status to be verified. ↩

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