

Editorial

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a European museum in possession of a good collection, must on no account ever sell any of it. This issue of the *Journal for Art Market Studies* sets out to question this assumption. The dictum is more recent than is perhaps generally known.

In 1955, the precious Ottoman Codex Aureus of Echternach was for sale in Germany. The jewel-encrusted cover made of gold and ivory was spectacular, as was the lavishly illuminated content. Without World War II, the codex would most likely have remained in the ducal collections in Gotha. With the approach of the Red Army, the ducal family managed to spirit it out of the ducal seat and transfer it to its castle in Coburg in the US zone of occupation further south. The codex was also on the list of nationally significant cultural assets of the Federal Republic of Germany.

When a purchase offer from the Metropolitan Museum in New York came in at one million dollars in 1954, the German government decided to intervene. The object's "natural home", as the German president Theodor Heuss put it at the time, was the German National Museum in Nuremberg. Yet the museum and the state alone could not find the requisite sum of money. The museum would need to sell a painting: an altarpiece by Lucas van Leyden went to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.¹

This is by no means a unique event. European museums were historically much less opposed to selling than we are currently meant to believe. Could a similar situation be imagined today? Would the German public accept a sale from the collection of the Berlin State Museums to fund, for example, a repurchase of the Guelph Treasure after restitution to its claimants? Howls of outrage are conceivable. But in the 1950s, a museum could quietly sell to do what politicians considered its duty of preservation to the nation.

A recent article in a main German daily newspaper denounced a deaccession process dating back to 1975 and culminating in a high-priced auction sale last year as a "forever

1 Timo Trümper (ed.), *Die verlorenen Meisterwerke. Wieder zurück in Gotha!* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2022), 70.

loss”.² This issue of the journal proposes that an open discussion is necessary. Is an object sold to the highest bidder indeed “lost forever”? Are private collections really black holes where items disappear for good? Proponents of enshrining collections, both institutional and private, might consider the role played by generational change. One argument against institutional sales is that changes in taste may influence decisions which would later be regarded as disastrous. But private collections are also subject to changes in taste. The children of a collector may well decide to sell or donate unfashionable objects. In doing so, they prompt another life cycle, with some objects going to museums and others to other collections, where they may remain hidden or displayed for all to see. Indeed, museum ownership is no guarantee of visibility to the public, as institutional depots demonstrate. Neither is private ownership a guarantee of withholding a precious object from public view.

Is today’s indignation at the idea of museum sales in Europe perhaps partly grounded in the losses from the Second World War? If this was not an issue in the 1950s, it seems unlikely that it would have set in later. Certainly, museum professionals have a point in arguing that tastes change and one generation’s disposable items may become the next generation’s prized assets (or vice versa). Hindsight is a wonderful thing. But at the same time, the museum as an institution from the nineteenth century needs to face the challenges of the twenty-first. Can it really do so if it refuses to envisage change? The beginning of restitutions to African countries may indicate a loosening of rigidity. We will observe the further discussion with much interest and are delighted to contribute some relevant historical research to the debate.

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2 Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Wie die “Maske der Winde” für immer verloren ging, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 June 2022.