BRAIN-be 2.0
Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

ProvEnhance

Enhancing the provenance data of the collections of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB) since 1933. Scientific study, digital valorization and narrative in context.

DURATION
01/02/2023 - 01/05/2027

BUDGET
676 442 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Since the 1990s, the study of the provenance of works of art has become increasingly important in Europe and the Western world. Following the Washington, Vilnius Forum and Terezin Declarations, Belgium studied some twenty years ago the issue of restitution of property looted from Jews during the Second World War, using the then available archival sources (see the reports of the Buysse Commission). The country has since dealt with several restitution cases (including in 2022 at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium the painting “Flowers” by Lovis Corinth). However, twenty years later, the international provenance research and societal landscapes have evolved. Among others, new sources and databases have come to light and there is an increasing awareness of the mechanisms of loot, which no longer exclusively includes forcibly confiscated or plundered art, but which already began with early forced sales around 1933, and finally also includes the so-called "flight assets" i.e., objects sold in the (supposedly) safe countries of exile to secure a livelihood or to pay for workers' visas, etc. The subject also requires a high degree of transparency in the choices made and the results obtained, and may give rise to wider societal debates.

The research will make use of all available sources (private and museum archives, sales catalogues, specialised press, war / postwar archives in Belgium and abroad, specialised databases, etc.) and applicable methods from the field of Digital Humanities (linked data, network analysis, etc.) to enrich the provenance data of the collections of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium and provide the necessary context through the study of the actors and practices of the art market and museum institutions in Belgium during the period of the Occupation, taking into account the institutional practices of the immediate post-war period.



Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, new shelter for paintings, 1940-1945
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The project will result in two doctoral theses, one on provenance research around the collections of the Royal Museums and the other on the art market during the Second World War, as well as scientific articles on related topics. Workshops with other Belgian museums, actors in provenance research such as academic teaching staff, auction houses, and international academic partners, on the one hand, and an international conference (midway through the project), on the other hand, will be organised.

The objective is also to address the challenges of transparency and societal participation, publishing the research results as structured datasets for the national and international research community, but also making them visible for the broader public, not only through the collection database of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels, but also through e.g.guided tours, publications on a public history website (CegeSoma, https://www.belgiumwwii.be) and other channels such a s social media.

A methodological part – which could include e.g. a guide to archival sources for provenance research in Belgium as well as recommendation for the publication of provenance research data – is also expected to benefit to other cultural heritage institutions in Belgium. The results of the project could sustain the Belgian government with provenance data in case of restitution claims and feed into the communication policy of the FPS Economy.

The project will rely on the expertise of a strong international scholarly community, through the partners in Belgium and Berlin, but also through existing professional networks in provenance and art market research. The project thus aims first on importing international expertise to provide basic knowledge and research infrastructure and methodology for future provenance research in Belgium but also on positioning Belgium as data provider in the international provenance research community. It could also contribute to develop the teaching of provenance research in Belgian universities, as happens abroad.

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LINKS

https://fine-arts-museum.be/en/research/research-projects/provenhance
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