

Tracing the Transfer of Cultural Objects: Challenging the Burdens of the Past¹

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Art history as a discipline came into being as an instrument for interpreting and praising national artistic and cultural heritage, and thus for devising national identity. The intertwining of art history and nationalist politics was a Europe-wide phenomenon. Art history was closely linked to nationalist ideologies during the establishment of the European nation-states of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In recent decades, after the demise of the Communist bloc, the national paradigm has once again strengthened. Not only in new states that have come into being, but in long existing ones that have been thrown into new social, economic, and political situations, national histories of art have been given a new impetus.² The persistence of the national paradigm up to the present (reflected primarily in institutional frameworks and curriculums, and consequently in approaches to research and museum programming) is still strongly felt across Europe, and it remains a constant challenge (if not a heavy burden) for any transnational endeavor.

In order to come to terms with this concept, the recently launched collaborative research project "Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century (TransCultAA)," largely situated at the intersection of politics and art—with its focus on cultural heritage in general and movable objects in particular—deals with a most sensitive and burning topic, as it touches upon core questions of identity, patrimony, and the ways in which different European states handle the past.

Funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), a partnership of European national humanities research councils in its third Joint Research Program (JRP) "Uses of the Past," the TransCultAA project itself carries the shadow of national histories precisely through its definition which was shaped to fit into existing frameworks of their respective European institutions. The JRP "Uses of the Past" identified that in order "to understand the pressing societal questions of identity, integration, political legitimacy, creativity, and cultural

dynamics across Europe, we need new, more complex understandings of how individuals and societies use and reflect upon the past, taking account of how cultural ideas, traditions, and practices are constructed, transferred, and disseminated among different agents and regions."³

A multinational team of scholars gathered in a research consortium of the TransCultAA project. This was composed of principal investigators from Germany (project leader Christian Fuhrmeister, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich), Italy (Donata Levi, Department of Humanities and Cultural Heritage, Università degli Studi di Udine), Slovenia (Barbara Murovec, France Stele Institute of Art History, Ljubljana), and Croatia (myself), with associated partners in Austria. The members felt the need to respond to HERA's call to analyze uses of the past, dealing in particular with historical and current conflicts of ownership, patrimony, and cultural heritage.⁴

Our research agenda is focused on the Alpe Adria region in the twentieth century, a multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational area that has witnessed uniquely complex combinations of shifting antagonistic forces. Alpe Adria is not a formal geographical or even political term with an agreed upon meaning, but is rather a more fluid concept of a region encompassing the northern Adriatic Sea up into the Alpine region, which includes north-eastern Italy, most of Slovenia, parts of Croatia, and parts of Austria. Its geographical and cultural boundaries, the number of national entities involved, the frequency of political changes, and the vicissitudes of war, present a unique, even paradigmatic, European experience.

A brief look at the chronological delineation (pre-1914, 1914–18, 1918–39/41/43/45, 1945–89/91, 1991–present)⁵ makes it very clear that we are talking of a series of conflicts within which various stakeholders employed different or similar strategies to appropriate cultural assets both materially and symbolically.

Cultural heritage issues played a key role in the Alpe Adria region, as ethnic and political powers habitually made selective uses of the past, from the Habsburg and *Kaiserlich und Königlich (K.u.K.)* monarchy to the interwar era, from fascist Italian to Nazi occupation, from socialist Yugoslavia and Cold War bloc systems to the successive entry into European bodies and agencies. Each of these phases witnessed special efforts of protection and, simultaneously, various forms of transfer of cultural assets. In addition to scrutinizing the

activities of German and Nazi authorities and individuals, the highly ambivalent term “safeguarding” is of key interest for the TransCultAA project.

Particular attention will be paid to those parts of the former Yugoslavia that belonged to Italy before World War II, to the redistribution of cultural assets formerly owned by Jews following their confiscation, plunder and seizure during World War II, and to the post-World War II communist mechanisms of dispossession of private property in Slovenia and Croatia. The complexity of these processes at the transnational level will be studied both in terms of the varying administrative practices applied to the management of the transferred heritage in different countries, and by tracing the movement of specific objects in the Alpe Adria region.

In order to illuminate specific cases, and to answer particular questions posed by the written or visual evidence, TransCultAA transcends the limits of proper art history, and looks beyond, especially to contemporary history; cultural history; museum, memory, and conflict studies; military history and history of politics and ideas; applied ethics (and moral challenges in particular); human rights; and so on. While the political sphere had an enormous influence in shaping the ways in which cultural heritage was treated in this transnational region, most if not all research efforts seem to adhere to a national agenda, or even to adopt the perspective of a single institution (like a museum), and in many cases research still does not cross national borders. It is this challenge—the urgent need to overcome traditional (institutional and national) —that is the point of departure for TransCultAA.

The objects, named in the project’s title as “cultural objects,” include, but are not limited to, art (painting, graphic arts, sculpture), books, furniture, porcelain, tapestries, musical instruments, and more generally all artifacts and natural objects that were customarily collected, stored, exhibited, sold, stolen, safeguarded, confiscated, deposited, translocated, and transferred in different ways.

Tracing the history of single objects, whole collections, or regional or national cultural heritage at large inevitably calls for an assessment of the larger historical and contemporary frameworks of interpretation, to achieve a nuanced and balanced picture of losses, translocations, and dispossessions.

Thus, moving far beyond the usual provenance investigation, the main research questions of TransCultAA are: What is the status of cultural heritage in times of conflict? Who transferred or translocated which objects in the Alpe Adria region, when, and why? Which explanations (if any) were—and are—given? Which narratives followed? Where are the objects today? What is their current status? How do archival documents (from the region and beyond) help us to understand these (regional and national) uses of the past?

In searching for answers to these questions, we currently see two main challenges that have to be overcome. First, although the research focus is well defined, it is hard to precisely predict the volume, nature, and character of the sources. We thus need a constant monitoring and discussion of archival findings: in what regard is this or that transfer of an object or group of objects an exemplary case that highlights/illuminates the way in which Europe, as a body of nation-states, has dealt with this part of its common history?

The second challenge to be faced is the fact that “knowledge is power,” not only in the sense that gathering new knowledge will enable us to put aside or challenge past perceptions, but also in the sense that various present or future manipulations may occur. Adopting a strict policy of scholarly treatment from a historical perspective will ensure a distance from possible manipulation by interested parties (current or future claims and lawsuits, art market and commercial pressure, and so on). Our main consideration is: what is the factual evidence, and what is our joint understanding of it?

The project is as yet too new to present tangible results, although the case studies so far identified to work further on it are encouraging. The research results will be presented in a range of diverse forms of dissemination, from scholarly articles and conference papers to joint publications of selected primary sources, and museum and virtual/online exhibitions. Nevertheless, a successful implementation of the very process of a novel joint research approach is expected to be a substantial contribution in challenging existing narratives and paradigms in European art history. Furthermore, despite its regional focus, TransCultAA’s fundamental aim of developing a joint research approach capable of overcoming myths, legends, and in particular, competing narratives, could be relevant in regard to other cross-cultural, and global contexts.

However, it is yet to be evaluated to what extent this kind of joint endeavor can fulfill the main goal of the HERA funding program, defined as: "to explore and systematize exactly what it means to be a reflective society and enable us to better understand processes of historical development, innovation, and social change that are fundamental to the human condition."⁶ After all, expecting that art history (or the humanities in general), even in its most transnational and interdisciplinary form, will "assist in building effective policies to encourage societal resilience, creative thinking, responsible citizenship and intelligent responsiveness to new challenges,"⁷ sets great expectations not only for our discipline but for society as a whole.

Notes

¹ This paper has been prepared in the framework of the HERA project 15.080 Transfer of Cultural Objects in the Alpe Adria Region in the 20th Century (TransCultAA).

² Cfr. Matthey Rampley, "The Construction of National Art Histories and the 'New Europe,'" in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 231–46.

³ HERA JRP, "Uses of the Past" Call, available at: <http://www.nwo.nl/en/funding/our-funding-instruments/gw/hera-jrp-uses-of-the-past%5B2%5D/hera-jrp-uses-of-the-past.html>; cfr. www.heranet.info.

⁴ Cfr. www.transcultaa.eu.

⁵ See Michael Wedekind, History. Timeline, <https://www.transcultaa.eu/timeline/>.

⁶ HERA JRP, "Uses of the Past" Call.

⁷ Ibid.