

 press release

*Orphaned Art:
Looted Art from the Holocaust in the Israel Museum*

On View from February 19 through June 3, 2008

Jerusalem, January 2, 2008 – The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, presents *Orphaned Art: Looted Art from the Holocaust in the Israel Museum*, an exhibition exploring the fate of works of art looted during World War II that were subsequently brought to Israel. Culled from 1,200 such works held in custody by the Israel Museum, all of which lack clear ownership history, *Orphaned Art* features over fifty paintings, drawings, prints, and books, together with a selection of Jewish ceremonial objects, and includes such artists as Jan Both, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Marc Chagall, Egon Schiele, and Alfred Sisley.

On view from February 19 through June 3, 2008, *Orphaned Art* presents a companion story to *Looking for Owners: Custody, Research, and Restitution of Art Stolen in France during World War II*, an exhibition on view concurrently at the Israel Museum that is drawn from the collection of stolen art in France known as Musées Nationaux Récupération (MNR).

“*Orphaned Art* offers an important opportunity to explore one dimension of the story of art looted during World War II, focusing specifically on those works whose histories vanished completely and which arrived in Israel during the early 1950s,” said James S. Snyder, the Anne and Jerome Fisher Director of the Israel Museum. “In presenting this exhibition concurrently with *Looking for Owners*, we hope to illuminate the range of ongoing efforts to conclude the saga of lost art and artifacts of World War II and to highlight the shared significance of this process within the international museum community.”

In 1948, works of art and Judaica that were identified as having been looted from Jews or Jewish communities but were heirless and unclaimed were released from their central collecting points in Germany and given to the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO). JRSO subsequently undertook a systematic program to distribute these orphaned objects among museums, synagogues, and other Jewish organizations in Israel and worldwide through the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR). Some of these objects were deposited for safekeeping at the Bezalel National Museum, predecessor to the Israel Museum, which, following its establishment in 1965, became the custodian of some 250 paintings, 250 works on paper, and 700 objects of Judaica, all received through JRSO-JCR.

Most of the JRSO works that arrived at the Israel Museum had no prior ownership history or basic catalogue information, and many came in poor condition, making conservation, restoration, and research an extensive undertaking, which is ongoing today. While these works have great emotional and sentimental value, many are of lesser art historical importance. At the same time, objects of significant artistic quality have been displayed regularly in the Museum’s galleries and exhibited and published worldwide. Beginning as

early as 1950, individuals have come forward to claim JRSO works, with the most recent claims honored in 2006 and 2007.

The Looting of Art during World War II

Before the beginning of World War II, Adolf Hitler declared his wish to transform his hometown of Linz, Austria, into the Third Reich's art capital, where all of the treasures of Europe would be exhibited. As a means to this end, Hitler recruited leading art experts to compile a secret "wish list" of works of art by so-called Aryan masters or works that had left German collections after the year 1500, to be "repatriated" to Germany. Plundering of public and private property, and especially of Jewish property, began in 1938 and reached a climax with the Final Solution. Major art collections were confiscated systematically throughout Europe, accompanied by other forms of looting, which included theft of works by Nazi soldiers and officers to give as gifts or for their own private collections, as well as forced sales of inventories from prominent art dealers.

At the end of the war a staggering volume of artworks, books, archival materials, and other cultural artifacts was discovered in hiding places throughout Germany and Austria – in depots, salt mines, castles, museum storerooms, and even private homes – and the arduous task of relocating rightful owners and returning treasures to their owners or legitimate heirs began. *Orphaned Art* and *Looking for Art* reflect aspects of this ongoing effort.

Publications

A fully detailed and illustrated online catalogue of all of the JRSO works in custody of the Israel Museum can be found in a special section of the Museum's website (www.imj.org.il), titled *World War II Provenance Research Online*. In conjunction with *Orphaned Art*, an illustrated catalogue will be published in English and Hebrew.

Program Organization

Orphaned Art is organized by the Israel Museum and curated by Shlomit Steinberg, Hans Dichand Curator of European Art at the Israel Museum.

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

The Israel Museum is the largest cultural institution in the State of Israel and is ranked among the leading art and archaeology museums in the world. Founded in 1965, the Museum houses encyclopedic collections ranging from prehistory through contemporary art. They include the world's most extensive holdings of Biblical and Holy Land archaeology, among them the Dead Sea Scrolls. In just over forty years, the Museum has built a far-ranging collection of nearly 500,000 objects through an unparalleled legacy of gifts and support from its circle of patrons worldwide. It has established itself as an internationally valued institution and a singularly rich cultural resource for Israel, the Middle East, and the world.

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