Jacques Schumacher: Hello and welcome to the latest episode in the Culture in Crisis podcast series, preservation by design. My name is Jacques Schumacher, I am the Provenance and Spoliation Curator at the V&A and I am joined today by Alice Minter who was the Curator for the Gilbert Collection on loan to the V&A. The preservation by design podcast series explores designed solutions to threats posed to our cultural heritage drawing from a wide spectrum of practitioners and the projects they are engaged with.

Today we will be talking about provenance research but before we do that, I would suggest that we just briefly talk about the Gilbert Collection at the V&A.

Alice Minter: Good Morning! So, yes, the Gilbert Collection is very interesting because it is one of the most comprehensive collections of European decorative arts built in the 20th century by a private collector, and he had an interesting story. Started being open in a museum in Los Angeles until the 1990s. Then had his own museum in Somerset House and finally in 2008 came to the V&A, with specific terms which is a loan agreement for 150 years.

It now has its four dedicated galleries at the V&A. Arthur Gilbert was of Jewish background, his name was actually Abraham Bernstein and Rosalind Gilbert his wife was also from a Jewish family. They both lived in Los Angeles, moved from London to Los Angeles in the 1940s and started acquiring at auction in the 1960s with their personal taste and then advised by art dealers and curators and external independent advisors.

Progressively they built their collection with four main themes, which are silver and gold treasures, gold boxes, micro mosaic and pietre dure and then finally portrait miniatures. So, it... within this collection you have got a wide range of types of objects. Spanning really from the 15th century up to the 20th century.

I think now my question for you Jacques is more... you joined in July. Why suddenly do we have this urge for looking into the provenance? Why the Gilbert Collection? And then ultimately what is your daily role really, and daily task?

JS Sure, so before I start talking about the Gilbert Collection specifically, I should probably talk about what provenance research is because not everybody might be familiar with it. So, provenance research is the research into the history of ownership of an object and this history... so, who owned it and at what times, is often times as interesting as the objects themselves. And it is particularly important if we talk about objects which have an unclear provenance with regards to the Nazi years.

And in this instance our goal is to identify objects which were lost by their original owners between ’33 and ’45. So, that we can identify them and return them to the rightful owners. The Gilbert Collection is a particularly fascinating case because as you said it is an enormous collection of more than 1,000 objects and they really started collection in the 1960s when provenance was not seen as a very important issue.

It was usually only mentioned when there was a famous previous owner such as an aristocrat or a particularly famous collector. So, you have a background in the auction world so when objects went up for sale then they would sort of be seen to increase the value often of objects.

AM Absolutely. Absolutely. It is true that that provenance is something which for an art dealer or for auction houses, its... the provenance has a very, very strong impact on the value of the object. It is something that for example me I find should be really important and clearly stated in a museum. For example, The Met, they clearly say ‘provenance’ and then you have got a line per ownership from the beginning, the birth of the object I would say up to the latest owner.
Then reaching... then arriving in the museum collection. I think that it is such an important work because it really encompasses the whole meaning of the history of an object behind. I really... for me it is one of the very, very strong cases that we should not just talk about object history. That term provenance is so, so, so important. And at auction it is true that it is a specific dedicated box that we have to fill in and it means two things. First of all, if we don’t have a provenance the object nonetheless can be interesting.

But it won’t be has... it won’t... it won’t have such a strong value as if you have got a provenance if it had belonged to an aristocratic or...

JS And we have an example of this in the Gilbert Collection. So, when art dealers offered him objects for sale. So, for example the Fredrick the Great snuff box, its value comes from the fact that it was once in the possession of the King of Prussia.

AM Exactly.

JS That was the reason why Arthur Gilbert paid such a high price for it. What you can see is that when they started collecting the focus was on famous previous owners and this has now shifted, and it really happened towards the end of their career as collectors in the 1990s when there was the debate about the restitution of Nazi looted art happening. There were several developments but the reasons why it became such an issue are really two-fold.

So, you had victims of the Nazis and their families who drew attention to the fact that looted objects were... had found their way into public and private collections all over the world and they tried to reclaim these objects. Then there was also a wider awareness of Nazi crimes and the issue of compensation. So, in the 1990s you had a debate about the compensation for slave labour and various other debates that culminated in the Washington Conference in 1999.

Where 44 nations said that they would identify... intensify their efforts to identify objects that were looted by the Nazis and then to take steps to return them to their previous owners. So...

AM Can I have one question though? Because that I think is something we should really flag up, is I think to my knowledge and you tell me if I am wrong. But this 1998 Washington Conference was really important to our knowledge that there was a problem and many people had been looted from their art possession. But at the same time is it legal or is it moral? My understanding is that it is a moral obligation that these countries have signed but not legal and I think that is probably where the problem is still at the moment.

JS Is that because it is moral it is completely relying on the good will of the museum, the institution, the owner to face the history of the object. Am I correct?

AM So, you are correct in the sense that the Washington Principles are not legally... were not legally binding. But they encouraged the nations to implement mechanisms that allow public collections for example to address these issues. So, what happened in the UK is that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport created the Spoliation Advisory Panel, which is a panel that can issue recommendations. So, when somebody makes a claim, they would submit their evidence to this panel. Then the collection, the museum would look into this case and sort of submit a memorandum.

Then a panel of experts, lawyers, historians, members of the art trade will then look at this evidence and then issue a recommendation that the national museums in the UK are supposed to follow. They can issue various different recommendations. So, for example it could be the restitution of the object. But they can also make alternative recommendations such as a compensation payment or they can suggest that the problematic history of the piece is acknowledged on a label for example.

But you are right that it is a big problem that this only applies to public collections and private collections are exempt. So, to put it quite simply it is not a crime to own a Nazi looted art and it is a very complicated issue because often times these objects they changed hands several times. So, maybe you have a succession of previous owners who did not know that this object was originally looted. So, in the UK the law was then passed, the so called 2009 Holocaust Act which enabled museums to... it is called deaccessioning objects.
What it means is that museums are allowed to remove objects from their collections and then to return them to the families which wasn’t possible before because the laws are designed to protect the coherence of public collections so that you don’t have a Museum Director who one day decides to sell everything off and destroy something that was built up for centuries.

AM So, that is how the V&A then was allowed to give back to the heir of Emma Budge in 2017 I think it was.

JS 2012…

AM 2012, sorry, some Meissen porcelain figures. Just for example I think it would be quite interesting either you or I to explain quickly, for example, a typical case of Emma Budge, her history and why you know we... because Emma Budge I think is a very iconic figure in terms of restitution and there is a lot of her collection which is coming... which are in public collection and progressively restituted and then are sometimes coming to the art market as well.

Do you want to do it?

JS Yeah, I think… I mean, it is a great case because we are both familiar with it because it plays such a big role both ends of the art market and the auction houses as well as in museums. What happened at the V&A was that in 2010 a lawyer who was... who represented the heirs to Emma Budge, who was a Jewish art collector living in Hamburg in Germany and alerted us to the fact that one Meissen piece was in the museum’s collections that had belonged to her collection.

It was explained to the V&A then that the collection was sold in a so called forced sale. So, Emma Budge died in 1936 and then in 1937 her collection was put up for auction in Germany and her heirs were not allowed to keep the auction proceeds and they never received compensation after the war for this fact. It was an enormous collection which was widely dispersed and again, it shows you how much attitudes have changed. Because this object came to the V&A in the 1980s and the curator was told that it had been in the collection of Emma Budge.

But the curator at the time just saw it as evidence for a piece that came from…

AM …One of the most iconic collections. Exactly.

JS …From one of the most iconic collections and so, the knowledge of how the Nazis persecuted members of the Jewish community - how they extracted property - from them was not widely known. We always have to remember that curators they are experts in art history, and they are not necessarily experts in the history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. So, when this claim was put forward in 2010, what the curators then did was they went through the entire collection and they were able to identify two more pieces that had Emma Budge’s stamp…

AM Yeah, label.

JS ...label on it and then the museum recommended the restitution of these three pieces and the matter was then referred to the Spoliation Advisory Panel. Which then issued a recommendation, the V&A followed. So, that is sort of the best-case scenario I would say. But to bring things back to the Gilbert Collection, we are sort of at the beginning of our research into the collection and I thought that we could perhaps talk about some of the cases that we have identified and some of the problems that arise both for me and for you as the curator of the collection.

Who is sort of responsible for pulling together and for communicating sort of the Gilbert message to a very diverse audience.

AM Before we do that, do you want to just start from the very, very beginning when we both started in July 2018. Because that is probably what people are going to ask. Okay, I have got an object but how do I know, where do I start. So, maybe we could just explain that we have started looking at the list and looking at that famous box, so called provenance where you are listing all the ownership that you know. Basically, we have identified I think out of the 1,200 objects something like 85, I think, objects.
85 objects where we saw something that we considered a red flag. So, that could be... so, for example, we perhaps also should say that many of the objects in the Gilbert Collection we do know that they were either in Nazi Germany or in a country that was occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War. What we then did is we looked for red flags. So, when the... we went through the files and the Gilbert Archive which is also remarkable because they have full access to the invoices and the correspondence with the art dealers which was very unusual.

So, we were able to identify objects that had the names of Jewish collectors associated with them, with art dealers who traded in Jewish property in Nazi Germany or abroad. But our main focus was really sort of on Jewish collectors in Germany or countries that were occupied by Germans.

Or for example when you have got a gap. For example, we know that it had belonged to a collector who was living in Germany for example or in Europe and then we have got this sort of gap say between 1930 up to 1970 when it came to the market then that is where we also red flag it. And say there is such a big gap in the ownership that we have to trace it as much as we can.

I mean, that is true. The provenance can... so, the information that we have can be suspicious but also the complete absence of provenance information is also extremely suspicious especially if we are dealing with objects that came from Germany; let's say a clock that was made say in Augsburg in Germany for example.

That is the thing also that maybe we should also flag, is it is the type of object. That is where you and I have been working together. Because you are an historian and I can... I know the object, and, in a sense, I can tell you that the type of collection which were built in Europe at the late 19th, early 20th century. That would be then most likely for sale, forced sale during the Second World War would be all master paintings, impressionist art, but that is not part of the Gilbert Collection.

But for the Gilbert Collection most relevant is going to be continental silver, so it can be so called German silver or Hungarian silver, mounted objects which were typical, very highly priced and therefore acquired by these such important collectors. But we could also have some gold boxes which also were prized and part of any typical collection that you should have.

So, it is also looking at the object and for example we know that if you have got British or a London silver object it is most unlikely, I would say... or the chances of having a spoliation issue is probably more unlikely than if you are talking about continental silver or snuff boxes. But it might be interesting for the people to, you know, for the audience to identify that as well. It is looking also at the object and trying to make sense of it.

And it is particularly difficult when you look at a collection like the Gilbert Collection because it is decorative arts. If you compare it to paintings, paintings not always but frequently they have labels on their backs which can help you to trace... with tracing the history. With decorative arts we usually only have the object to go by and it is very difficult because snuff boxes for example, they are tiny, tiny boxes and in auction catalogues from the 1930s for example they are often not very... the description is often not very detailed. So, it is very, very difficult to match these objects with known objects that were looted.

But... so our... put simply our goal is to find out as much as we can about the objects that we identified and to get as far as we can and then to share this information with researchers.

Exactly.

I think it is also very important to point out that if we... that it is a process and the fact that we are unable to establish the provenance in some cases... so, it is not necessarily a problem it just means that we do not have the full information at the time. It is a very time-consuming process. But we have been able to sort of clarify the provenance of quite a lot of objects in the collection already which has not led to a restitution of an object. But which has I would say, significantly deepened our knowledge of the collection and which sort of allows us to then bring this information to an audience which increasingly interested in the history of ownership of these objects.

Okay, I would suggest that we talk about a concrete example to sort of outline the...
AM Yeah. Can you please, please, please tell us about your amazing research about the Goldsmith/Rothschild box which I found absolutely fascinating? I know everyone would love to hear about it.

JS So, what happened was that in 1979 Arthur Gilbert acquired a gold box from a London dealer. Do you want to say a few words about the box and describe it maybe?

AM Well, actually it is interesting because it is a typical French snuff box, made in Paris about 1770s which is really typical. It is rectangular, it is gold with red enamel on it and you have got so many of these. The only way to identify it is because you have got a monogram LM on it. So, it is literally looking for a needle in a haystack because these kind of boxes, you have got so many everywhere in public/private collection and on the art market.

JS So, what we found in the V&A archives, we found a hand-written note that said that this gold box had come from the collection of Goldschmidt-Rothschild. So, Goldschmidt-Rothschild was a Jewish family in Frankfurt am Main, but we didn't know which member of the family the gold box belonged to and we didn't know about any of the circumstances of how it left their collection. So, what we did is I went to Frankfurt to conduct research in the Frankfurt city archives which holds the inventory of the Maximilian von Goldschmidt Rothschild collection and shows you that he was systematically persecuted by the Nazis.

He was a very wealthy Jewish banker in Frankfurt, he had an enormous art collection. He housed the art collection in a very, very impressive mansion in Frankfurt and as I said he was systematically persecuted. So, it started when the city of Frankfurt forced him to sell his real estate bit by bit in 1937 and 1938. So, what happened was that he had to sell his mansions to the city of Frankfurt for an amount that was significantly below market value.

JS So, he was very old at the time, he was in his 80s. He was born in 1840 and what then happened was that the Frankfurt customs officers froze his assets to prevent him from transferring his assets abroad. They had expressed particular interest in his art collection which was very well known among the art world in Germany especially among German museum directors in Frankfurt, who thought that they could maybe use the opportunity and seize the collection for their museums.

So, what happened then was that on the 9th of November of 1938, we saw massive violence against the members of the Jewish community in Frankfurt. So, the synagogue was set ablaze, a mob ransacked Jewish businesses. Jewish men and women were mistreated in the streets and it was precisely that moment that the mayor of Frankfurt thought it would be a good opportunity to convince Maximillian von Goldschmidt Rothschild to sell his entire art collection to the city of Frankfurt.

So, what they did is they called him, and his private secretary answered the phone, Maximillian von Goldschmidt-Rothschild was sick at the time and they told him if you sell the art collection to us then we will put up signs in front of your house that identify the house as municipal property to protect it from destruction. So, this is then what happened. So, he sold his collection to the city of Frankfurt and the museum directors immediately came to his house and started to create an inventory of the collection.

JS Instead of moving the collection to their museum they simply declared his mansion as a new branch of the Frankfurt Museum for Decorative Arts, and he had to live in a small apartment within this house. When I was in the city of Frankfurt... so, the problem that you just outlined is that the box is so nondescript and the only thing that we really had to go by was the monogram.

The problem is that in the list that Maximilian von Goldschmidt-Rothschild created of his collections, this inventory the monogram does not appear. It is just described as a gold box and there are forty of them. None of them are very well described. So, in the archives of the Museum for Applied Art in Frankfurt we found an inventory card that was created at the time by the German curators and thankfully they took a photograph of the box and they wrote a very detailed description.

That then allowed us to identify with absolute certainty that this was indeed the same box. That then opened up a lot of other questions because in the archive we found that the museum had exchanged boxes
with other museums during the war. Some of the objects in the collections just disappeared, some of them were destroyed during the bombing war. So, we had a lot of questions and...

JS But ultimately what we were able to find out is that the box was restituted after the war. Maximillian von Goldschmidt-Rothschild, he died in 1940. But it was restituted to the members of his family. So, from a restitution stand point there is not an issue with this object because it was returned. There is no question that Arthur Gilbert acquired it legally. But it then raised the question, what do we do with this information.

So, throughout this research project we collected... we gathered all this material that allows us to really bring to life the experience of this art collector, who after he had sold the collection, his bank accounts were still blocked. The Nazis sort of imposed discriminatory taxes on him. So, the members of the Jewish community they were forced to pay compensation for the destruction that the Nazis had caused on the 9th of November. It allows us to... I did research into the experiences of his employees many of whom were deported to extermination camps in the east.

So, we have all this material and I think the challenge for us now is how do we translate...

AM ...What to do with it?

JS ...What to do with it. And I think a common misconception is that provenance research is just about checking boxes and making sure that there is no problem. But I think we found in our conversations that it is an enormous opportunity to tell an interesting and moving story about this experience and to use the objects as an entry point or as a lens through which we can explore this.

AM Absolutely.

JS This is sort of where you came... where you come in because I am a historian, I can go to archives and read these documents. But translating it into something that is accessible to the public in a museum setting is an enormous challenge and I think it would be great if you could talk about your plans for the Gilbert Collection and sort of how that fits into your curatorial practice.

AM I think you are right it’s... so far, until really recently provenance has been really considered as ticking the boxes and hiring someone part time or you know fully dedicated for short term to just make sure that the collection was clean. It can be private, it can be public, but ‘oh we are fine we have nothing to feel bad about’.

Now, I think that in 2018 it is far much more important to... far more important, sorry, to bring that to another level which is simply we are a museum, the Gilbert Collection is now open to the public and it is as you said so important to tell the story of this object and then to acknowledge what happened to this owner. There is no shame in saying well this is where we are, and we don’t know the rest.

Just asking the audience, asking the visitors, you know, what do you think, do you have any further information, does that ring a bell. So, for our...

JS I mean, you are raising the question, what do we do when we sort of have a strong suspicion that there might be something wrong with an object, but we don’t have a definitive answer. I can say that I am in a very fortunate position that the V&A has the policy that is completely open and transparent about what the museum knows about its collections. So, we... our strategy in these cases is just to put out there what we know and to contact as many experts as we can and ask them for help and guidance.

Hoping that they will be able to clarify the provenance for us. I mean, as you said, it is not an admission of guilt if you don’t know something. It just means that more research needs to be done. It is often unpredictable how the case will end. So, in the Max von Goldschmidt-Rothschild case I strongly suspected that we would have to return the box at the end of the research - and that isn’t the case.

AM Exactly.

JS What you said about the visitors, so we have noticed that they are extremely interested in these histories. But it is very, very difficult to communicate it to them. So, what we did, Alice ran a labelling session at a
conference not so long ago where we tried to find ways to communicate these very complex research findings that took me, I don’t know maybe ten minutes to explain and put it on a label. Most people do not know this.

AM A label is 60 words. So... and that is your question, what are we going to do with all this important information. Our project, [unclear 00.30.24] for the Gilbert Collection but also as a pioneering experience for the rest of the V&A and ultimately for the rest hopefully of... you know, the UK institution, it sounds quite ambitious but at least, you know, reassuring the UK institution that there is no shame in putting out what you have said and where you are at.

But our curatorial challenge now is to transmit that to the visitors. So, we are going to be opening hopefully in March 2020. Put together a provenance trail, where we are going to hopefully as much as we can transmit all the research that Jacques has done so far. But indeed, the challenge of putting and explaining everything that you have said during the last ten minutes in a 60 word label is extremely challenging. Already we are considering are we going to use extra digital tools, are we going to use an extra booklet that people can walk around with or shall we just keep it very simple.

It is going to be very challenging but yes very, very exciting.

JS And some of the challenges are for example in the case that I just talked about, you don’t want to leave visitors who might not be very familiar with the history of Nazi Germany... so, you have to remember that we have 4 million visitors from all over the world who come to...

AM Per year.

JS Per year, yeah, and they don’t have this pre-existing knowledge. So, if they look at a very short label, they might leave with the wrong...

AM Impression.

JS Impression and the question is also, how do you communicate events that are extremely dark and gruesome, whether it is about destroying existences, driving people into exile, deportation and mass murder. How do you communicate that in a dignified and tactful manner in a very, very short label especially if for example there is not a restitution case? Where we just want to acknowledge the experience of a previous owner because we think it is important.

So, that is still something that we are struggling with.

AM Absolutely.

JS It is very interesting if you sort of test various approaches with visitors, they all have different responses, they all want to know different things. I guess, the danger with digital tools is that the only ones who are probably going to look at sort of the detailed information are the ones who already know quite a lot and they just want to deepen their knowledge. So, that will be a big challenge, but hopefully we will be able to learn from the experiences of colleagues in other countries. So, there were 27 exhibitions of... about provenance in Germany in the past few years.

So, we also use sort of our provenance research project to cooperate with international partners.

AM Absolutely and it is true that you have already quite... you have raised dramatically since you have arrived the profile of the provenance curator. And apart from the British Library, I think that you are the only one in the UK full time dedicated curator to Nazi spoliation and provenance. So, yeah, what we are trying to do is to simply admit, we are there, we are trying, but we are the first ones of that type in the UK.

But also, we are open to discussion and I think that alongside this trail we are going to try... well, you are organising a series of seminars where you have invited quite a few people already and the first one is sold out I think I have been told.

JS Yes, it is sold out.
But also, we are most likely going to organise a few conferences open to the public and it is very much a work in progress. I think there is no shame in doing that. What of course with my background working in auction houses I think it is also extremely important to be able to collaborate not only you in the scale of the UK, in the scale internationally within public collection, but also with the rest of the art world.

There are so many private collectors who would be appalled if they knew that the object that they acquired had belonged or was the subject of spoliation. But they just simply don’t know. So, it is a really global effort to make things clearer and clearer and admitting that you have got a case of spoliation doesn’t mean that you are guilty of it. But I think personally even as we said at the beginning that it is only moral not legally, but I think that if you decide to keep it then that is where you are then guilty … that is a judgement, you know, I should keep for myself.

But the... yes, we have got this exhibition, we have got a series of seminars that we are going to put together. We are just going to open it to the visitors, open it to the various audiences and just get any feedback that we are delighted to have.

So, I think what we talked about really shows that we could not do what we do without cooperating with our partners, be it in Germany where the archivists show us the documents or our colleagues at the Getty which has a fantastic research centre provenance or our colleagues at LACMA in Los Angeles which also has objects from the Gilbert Collection in it. So, I think it would be a great opportunity to talk about sort of other projects that we have in mind.

Yeah, well, absolutely. So, as I said, you know, as we said, we are putting this trail together, but I think that a trail is actually going to be the consequence or the ultimate project for the scale of the Gilbert Collection of course and hopefully it will go much further after. But the final project of a series of different events that we are going to put together. So, you have got your seminars through 2019 which I have heard is sold out already.

These seminars are more orientated towards other personalities within the art world, right?

Also, the rationale was that there is so many different researchers at various institutions in the UK working on restitution issues or provenance research be at a university, a museum, libraries....

Art dealers.

Art dealers, auction houses, NGOs like the Commission for Looted Art. So, I thought it would be a great idea to create a space where you can bring all of them together and where they can share their research because we are often working on very similar cases but often times people at different institutions start from scratch trying to reconstruct the same history. So, I think that is very important but then you have in mind...

Well, public definitely conference I think will be really interesting, as we said again and again and again, there is no shame in what we are doing and there is no shame in a sense, not finding something is an admission, it is not an admission of guilt and I think we should put it out and just say this is where we are and open to the audiences, express our challenges, express the excitement of finding something and tracing it back completely and knowing that the case is closed. We have ticked the boxes but actually we really insist on telling the story.

So, there will be I think a few public events in conjunction and in collaboration with Culture in Crisis because that is really such an important part of that larger subject I would say.

And Culture in Crisis has a great job at promoting awareness for provenance and essentially to prevent the acquisition of objects that might become a problem in the future and the subject of restitution claims.... restitution claims in the future because the objects might have been illegally excavated in conflict regions or looted in present day conflicts in Syria or Iraq. So, they are very forward facing but also obviously that... but also, in a sense taking on board the experiences that we have now sort of made with our provenance research into Nazi looted art.
Where we look at objects that... so, today for example we would look much more closely at a collection like the Gilbert Collection before allowing it to come to the museum. We are doing it now, which is great, and has obviously an impact that is not just limited to the Gilbert Collection but to other areas in the museum. So, we contribute to due diligence across the museum and we try to promote an awareness for the fact that who owned an objected and the circumstances in which they lost possession of it is very, very important.

So, I am very much looking forward to sort of continuing our collaboration with Culture in Crisis and to sort of find ways in which we can bring it all together.

AM Yeah. Absolutely.

JS Maybe this is a good note to end on and I would suggest that you check out the Gilbert Collection webpage.

AM Absolutely.

JS And the V&A events page which has our in focus gallery tools, our various talks, there is an annual Gilbert Lecture with high profile speakers. I have my seminars series and I am sure that we can put all of the links in the description box below. Yeah, thank you so much Alice it was really great.

AM Thank you.

JS Yeah.

END OF RECORDING.