

Actes numériques du colloque

« Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?

Tentatives d'identification et de restitution, un chantier en cours »

23 et 24 mars 2017, Paris

## Case study August Liebmann Mayer : Munich – Paris – Munich

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Tischner Maria. *Case study August Liebmann Mayer : Munich – Paris – Munich* [en ligne]. In : Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?, Paris, 23-24 mars 2017. Villeurbanne : École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques, 2019. Format PDF.

Disponible sur : <https://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/notices/68742-case-study-august-liebmann-mayer-munich-paris-munich>

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**Où sont les bibliothèques françaises spoliées par les nazis ?** Presses de l'Enssib, avril 2019.

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## Case study August Liebmann Mayer: Munich – Paris – Munich

*Maria Tischner, M. A.*

### Introduction

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, I am happy that my submission was accepted and I am also grateful to the DAAD for covering my travel expenses.

I will start with an overview of the relevant historical events connected to the biography of the Jewish art expert August Liebmann Mayer; by doing this, I will also track the long way of his expert library. After this, I will present the results of the research project on this topic, which I completed just a few months ago, and I will end with a short paragraph on the restitution of the identified books to his daughter, Angelika Mayer.

### The fate of the Jewish art expert

Without any doubt, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish art historian August Liebmann Mayer was regarded as *the* expert on Spanish art.

Mayer was born in 1885, in Griesheim near Darmstadt. He studied art history in Berlin and was a student of Heinrich Wölfflin. In 1907, he published his dissertation on *Jusepe de Ribera*. Two years later, he started an unpaid position at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. It was him who published the exhibition catalogue of the collection *Marczell von Nemes*, which was a huge event in Munich in summer and fall of 1911. Also in this year, he published the first German monograph on *El Greco*, as well as a book on the *Seville school of painting*. But this was only the start of his lifelong, very productive publication activity: a quick browse on the kubikat search engine shows far over 300 hits.

In 1914, he became a curator at the Alte Pinakothek. That same year, he also did his habilitation and worked from then on as a lecturer at Munich University. In 1920, he became a supernumerary associate professor, got promoted to chief conservator at the Alte Pinakothek, and also got married to Aloisia Däuschinger. Ten years later, in 1930, their daughter Angelika Bertha Mayer was born. Between these years, Mayer was very active, not only in his two jobs, but also as a highly demanded expert for collectors, scholars, and notably dealers. He had a huge international professional network in France, Spain, Great Britain and the US. Additionally, he was very well connected and a part of the academic élité in Bavaria and the intellectual circles in Munich.

The years 1930 and 31, however, mark a sudden turning point in his life. During an exhibition at the Alte Pinakothek some art historians accused Mayer of having deliberately attributed some of the paintings falsely to better known artists – in order raise their prices, as Mayer received a share of the selling price. The handling of expert opinions had been viewed with some mistrust since the late 1920s. So this case can be seen as some kind of valve to long accrued discontent – with Mayer as target.

He rejected the accusations decidedly, but the pressure on him grew stronger. To avoid further public controversy, Mayer decided to step down from his positions at the Alte Pinakothek and the university. Unfortunately, his opponents interpreted the resignation as an admission of guilt. It seems that this attack, which was focussed on the strong ties between experts, museums and the art trade, was a catalyser for an anti-Semitic smear campaign: as early as in March 1931, the right-wing journal "Völkischer Beobachter" accused Mayer of having hidden his Jewish descent from the public.



From this state of affairs, it was only a short step to the first national-socialist actions in 1933. Mayer got accused of tax evasion or tax fraud in the years between 1925 and 1932: 115,000 Reichsmark were reclaimed. As he was not able to pay this amount, his house in Tutzing (his weekend home in the south of Munich) was confiscated. He was arrested and his apartment in Munich was searched by the police. While in custody – exposed to repeated interrogations and probably torment – he tried to commit suicide. By the time he got released, he had still the naïve hope that it was possible for an internationally accredited expert like him to keep up his work as a freelance art historian – but then his passport got seized. To get it back, Mayer had to pay the huge sum of 2,600 Reichsmark – which he borrowed from the London-based art dealer Duveen. Essentially, only because of his international network, he managed to escape Nazi Germany a year later.

Meanwhile, Mayer's economic exploitation went on. To settle his fake debts from the accusation of tax evasion, his house in Tutzing was sold. But the achieved amount of 36,000 Reichsmark was by far not enough. So more of his possessions were seized: Mayer's carefully built art collection was split up and some of the works were sold at auctions.

This is also where – for the first time so far – his huge library is brought into effect. It was confiscated to add up on the sum that was still left to settle the debts. Mayer's library is said to have been the biggest library on Spanish art outside of Spain – that alone would have meant that it was huge. But he did not limit his interests and expertise on Spain. He published on several Italian artists, on Dutch paintings, German portraits, French art, just to mention a few of them. He wrote catalogues of private collections and exhibitions, on old masters and on contemporary art. The fact that he was well connected in the art world results in a brisk exchange of publications with colleagues who had very different fields of research. And, of course, for his occupation as an art expert he needed a vast amount of expert literature, as he was consulted in varying subjects.

In late 1935, he managed to immigrate to Paris with his family. To be able to work abroad as an expert and art historian, he urgently needed his library in Paris. Again, it was his international network that supported him, and eventually his library was sent to Paris.

As of 1937, the family lived in a big apartment in Rue du Mont Thabor. Up until 1940, he was able to work as an art historian and earn an income by writing articles for magazines and making appraisals.

But even then, in the exile, he was not secure from the seizure of the Nazis. Furthermore, he was also interned twice for several months within less than one year by *French* authorities. So he decided to head to the unoccupied south and settled in Nice in 1941. From then on, things became even worse. His wife died the same year from cancer, just shortly before joining him in Nice. However, Mayer managed to have his daughter visit him there. By frequent relocations he tried to escape his persecutors, but in February 1944 he was arrested by the Gestapo in Monte Carlo. From there he was brought to the transit camp Drancy and finally deported to Auschwitz. He was murdered around the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 1944. His daughter Angelika – 14 years old – was from then on a stateless orphan.

In 1963, after many years of arguing with German authorities, Angelika Mayer received a little compensation for the losses she had to endure. And it was only in 2010 that the Bavarian State Painting Collections restituted to her four paintings that were seized from her father. And in 2015, not even two years ago, the CIVS (la commission pour l'indemnisation des victimes de spoliations) paid 165,000 Euros of compensation to Angelika Mayer, for the looting of all the family's belongings from their apartment in Paris, including furniture, art, and the library.

## What happened to the library of A. L. Mayer?

But what exactly had happened to the library of her father? In 1942, when Mayer had already moved to the south of France, two different Nazi-organisations competed for his property. While the second organisation cannot be specified exactly, the first confiscation was conducted by one woman of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, Annemarie von Tomforde. They took all the books, and it was a huge library. Eye-witnesses reported that the room measured 9 by 12 meters.

Packed in 39 crates, we assume that the books were shipped to Berlin – as part of the Sammlung or collection Hermann Göring. But due to air-raid precautions, they were then shipped to Schloss Kogl in Austria. They stayed there until American soldiers found them and brought them to the Central Collecting Point in Munich. Here, the German librarian Hans Beilhack worked for the Library of Congress Mission. He examined all the crates that came from Schloss Kogl and attributed a large amount of them to – I quote – "the former Jewish authority in art, Prof. August L. Mayer"<sup>1</sup>. We cannot exactly tell how many books there were. Based on the Beilhack-report, we reckon with around two thousand books, maybe more. Books with clear hints to their provenance were separated from the other books, whose previous owners were unknown. Then they were given to the Offenbach Archival Depot, from where their track was lost. But the other art books – those with unknown previous owners – were dedicated to the newly founded Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte.

After many years of research accomplished by Dr. Christian Fuhrmeister und Susanne Kienlechner, on which my presentation is based on, a project dedicated to Mayer's library was granted to the Zentralinstitut.

## The research results achieved during the project

According to the Washington Principles, the Zentralinstitut – as a public institution – is obliged to search its collections for looted cultural assets. The goal of this project was to find Mayer's books in the library of the Zentralinstitut and retribute them to his daughter Angelika. Accordingly, the only thing we had to do was to find books with hints that indicate that Mayer was the previous owner – in a library of around 570,000 volumes – in five months.

To make the search for these books even a little harder, the old inventories do not tell anything about the origin of the books. The so called "Altbestand" of the ZI, which is all the books that came from the CCP, does not feature any information whatsoever – except that they were transferred from the CCP. Otto Lehmann-Brockhaus, who was the first librarian in charge, obviously did not feel responsible to check their origin. In 1948, he wrote to director Heydenreich: "The elimination of old stamps has been finished for a while now."<sup>2</sup>

Luckily, it was possible to limit the number of books we had to search. Relevant were only volumes that were published before 1945 – which applied to only 52,000 books. Using the empirical values of other libraries, we anticipated one minute per book – an amount that would have been doable by two part-time employees – theoretically. We soon realized that the estimated value was suitable for libraries that are sorted by *numerus currens*. But the library in the Zentralinstitut is a publicly

<sup>1</sup> Beilhack-Report, The National Archives (NARA), Ardelia Hall Collection: Munich Administrative Records. Records Concerning the Central Collecting Points: Munich Central Collecting Point, 1945–1951, Record Group 260, Library of Congress, p. 2 f.

<sup>2</sup> "Mit der Tilgung der alten Stempel sind wir schon lange fertig." Thomas Lersch: Die Bibliothek: Geschichte – Sammelauftrag – Funktion, in: Iris Lauterbach (Red.): Das Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich 1997, p. 39–50, here p. 39.

accessible library – and therefore arranged by themes. This made the search for books much harder, because the "Altbestand" was not standing side by side, but is scattered all over the different topics.

Let me quickly sum up the difficulties we had to start with: Books with clear hints were already sorted out by Beilhack; we had no further information in the old inventories regarding the „Altbestand“; old stamps etc. had been erased or blackened out under Lehmann-Brockhaus up until 1948; the books in the library are not sorted by numerus currens, but by topics.

As all books with distinct hints had already been sorted out by Beilhack in 1947, it was clear from the beginning that we would not find a huge number of books. To begin with, we prioritised sections with affinities to Mayer's interests: Spanish art and artists, French, German, Dutch art, exhibition and collection catalogues, and so on. We worked our way down to topics Mayer was not associated with.

Because we knew quite well what exactly we were looking for, we could effectively focus our research. But we also listed "collateral troves" whose provenance still needs to be checked: every book with an ex libris, handwritten notes, owner's marks and stamps.

At the end of the project we had searched around 21,000 books and found 27 which formerly belonged to Mayer. Two of them have a single-handed signature and five contain a personal dedication to him.

A very special example is this handwriting, presumably blacked out under Lehmann-Brockhaus in 1948. Very slightly, the writing is shining through: it is a dedication, saying – *please excuse my French*: A Maître A. L. Mayer, Avec l'expression de la haute estime de l'auteur (Al. Busuioceanu). Unfortunately, the situation rarely is that clear. In most cases we found a combination of hints, which means books that cover Mayer's main fields of interest and have marginalia in Mayer's handwriting.

Another obvious example: a French publication on Spanish sculpture published in 1938, with notes in German, looking like Mayer's handwriting: beyond question this book belonged to Mayer, who had already been living in Paris at that time. Eventually, we found one last hint that cleared up any left doubts: a tiny side note, commenting: „mein Aufsatz (...) für Wölfflin“, meaning "my essay for Wölfflin". Indeed, Mayer had published an essay in a Festschrift for Heinrich Wölfflin, regarding "The Romanic capital in Spain".

Clearly, this is a special case. Most of the time, we didn't find such a compelling combination of hints. I am well aware that it is not common to track back books on the basis of the content of their handwritten notes. This is way too time-consuming and in most cases ineffective. But in this project, it was often the only way.

## The restitution

On November 30<sup>th</sup> 2016, a section on our project opened the “colloquium of provenance and collection research”. It was a collaborative restitution together with the Bavarian State Library, who had also found three of Mayer's books in their stock and gave them back to their rightful owner.

The ZI restituted the 27 books to the legal representative of Angelika Mayer. She is 87 years old and lives in Los Angeles. Her lawyer read a short statement that she wrote (*maybe there will be added a short quote*). It was her wish that the books stayed in the library of the Zentralinstitut, where they can stay in continuous use for research.

To make sure that the provenance of the books will not be overlooked *again*, we added an ex dono to each of them. It tells the fate of August Liebmann Mayer in an abbreviated version. We also added a field to the OPAC (our online library catalogue), that calls attention to the provenance of the book.

Undeniably, doing provenance research in the library of the Zentralinstitut is still at the very beginning. Ideally, a full-time researcher on a permanent position will systematically check both the existing collection that includes many Nazi art libraries (Hitler, Göring, Hans Posse), and also the current antiquarian acquisitions.

Looking back to a short part-time project of less than 6 months, my conclusion is: It was an important task, and despite the difficult circumstances, we achieved most of the goals. In particular, we restituted those cultural objects to the daughter that were unlawfully housed in a public German institution.

However, we barely scratched the surface of the holdings, and we did not have the time to expand and explore beyond the narrow framework of the project. For instance, we could not at all trace the trajectory of the books that were shipped to Offenbach. Hence, my assessment is ambivalent, as the accomplishments only indicate the amount of work that remains to be done.