

NATIONALISATION AND MUSEALISATION OF ART COLLECTIONS IN SLOVENIA IN THE LIGHT OF PROVENANCE RESEARCH



LECTURE by
Michael Wedekind

Tuesday, 18 November 2025, 15:00
ZRC SAZU, Atrij ZRC

Lecture:

Seizing the Past – Shaping the Future

Slovene Cultural Heritage under Nazi Occupation

Seizure and transfer of cultural heritage across German occupied Europe were part of the Nazi strategy for reorganizing the continent's space and population. The appropriation of artifacts is closely linked to the appropriation of the past and its reinterpretation; it is aimed at claiming, securing and representing power as well as at the denationalisation of people and the 'ethnic purification' of cultural landscapes. As was the case of Slovenia, cultural heritage is generally loaded with complex symbolic emotional, historical and ideological charges. While it is therefore hardly surprising that the confiscation of cultural assets played a major role in Nazi occupation policy, marked by intense efforts to eradicate Slovene identity and culture, it does come as a surprise, however, that this subject remained largely unaddressed by historians and art historians until only a few years ago. The paper traces the numerous German authorities involved in the relocation of cultural assets; it analyses their specific intentions as well as their ways of thinking and acting. It deals with the differences compared to other Nazi occupied territories, and traces the whereabouts of works of art and their political use and musealisation. The paper also sheds light on those collaborating circles of Slovene society (not only of 'volksdeutsch' origin) that occasionally were key figures in seizing artifacts. Finally, it touches upon the lengthy post-war restitution processes, which for a long time were overshadowed by the Cold War, by persisting ethnic conflicts, excessive Yugoslavian claims and Austrian obstructionism.

Michael Wedekind studied History, Romance Languages and Education at the universities of Bologna and Münster in Westphalia, where he obtained his doctorate with a thesis on the German occupation of Northeast Italy during the Second World War (Operational zones of the Prealps and of the Adriatic Littoral). Teaching and research have taken him to the universities of Münster, Trento and Vienna, as well as to the Central Institute for Art History in Munich, with visiting professorships in Bucharest and Trento. His publications and research focus primarily on Italo-German relations, the recent history of the Alpine Adriatic region and South-Eastern Europe, as well as on mountain studies and the history of tourism and mountaineering. His most recent independent publications are: "Bevölkerungsgeschichte eines mitteleuropäischen Übergangsraumes: Tirol – Südtirol – Trentino 1880-2010", Vienna: Böhlau 2025, edited together with Rodolfo Taiani (Italian edition: Trento 2021); "Contested Space – Contested Heritage: Sources on the Displacement of Cultural Objects in the 20th-Century Alpine-Adriatic Region", Udine: Forum 2021, edited together with Donata Levi; „Die Besetzung der Vergangenheit: Archäologie, Frühgeschichte und NS-Herrschaftslegitimation im Alpen-Adria-Raum“, Innsbruck: Studien Verlag 2019, now available also in English in an abridged and enriched contribute to the edited volume "Archäologie und Krieg" (eds. Svend Hansen and Christian Jansen), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2025.

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< Commemoration of the anniversary of the occupation of Maribor, April 11 and 12, 1942, gathering at the main square (Adolf Hitler Platz). National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia; photo: Veit.

Lead partner of the project

ZRC SAZU, France Stele Institute of Art History

Project partners

Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor; National Museum of Slovenia



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