


# *Vitalizing Memory*

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## **INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON PROVENANCE RESEARCH**

AMERICAN  ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

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**Vitalizing Memory: International Perspectives on Provenance Research**

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## *Hildebrand Gurlitt and the Art Trade during the Nazi Period*

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Katja Terlau

WHILE conducting a research project on acquisitions made at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum/Fondation Corboud in Cologne during the years 1933 to 1945, I came across the name Dr. Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895-1956).<sup>1</sup> Through Gurlitt's single-handed efforts, the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (WRM) procured 32 major works of art, sculptures as well as paintings, from 1941 through 1944. These new additions came from France, almost all from former private collections in Paris. The name of the previous owner was noticeable on only a few examples. Most were returned to France after the Second World War, however, a few remain in the museum and their origins remain unknown.

While I was conducting this research at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, there were several cases in the Federal Republic of Germany—in which art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt had played a role—involving return of artworks to their rightful heirs. Here are three examples from Cologne.

The painting *Zwei weibliche Halbakte* (Two Female Half Acts) by Otto Mueller, 1919, was confiscated by the Gestapo from the collection of Ismar Littmann in Breslau. This painting, then labeled as "degenerate," did not sell at the Galerie Fischer auction in Lucerne in 1939. It made its way back to Germany in 1940 and into the hands of Hildebrand Gurlitt. He sold it to Cologne collector Josef Haubrich who donated his collection to the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in 1946. The Museum Ludwig in Cologne returned the painting to the rightful owner's heirs in 1999.

The painting *Landschaft mit zerborstener Brücke* (Landscape with Broken Bridge) by Meindert Hobbema was sold to the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum by Gurlitt for 125,000 Reichsmarks (RM) in 1941. It came to Gurlitt following a forced sale from the collection of Frederico Gentili di Guiseppe in Paris. The painting was returned to the rightful owner's heirs in 2000.

The picture *Die Weintraube* (La Grappa de Raisin) by Louis Marcoussis, 1920, was on loan from the Küppers-Lissitzky Collection to the Provinzial Museum in Hanover. In 1937, the work was confiscated from the museum and fell into Gurlitt's hands. Later, the painting was bought by the collector Haubrich and given as a gift to the city of Cologne in 1950. After the true origin of the painting was discovered in 1999, it was restored to its rightful owner, Jen Lissitzky.

These restitutions of paintings handled by Gurlitt raise a number of questions: Who was this dealer? Where did he acquire the artworks that landed in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum? Was his acquisition of these works harmless and irrelevant, as he claimed after the war? Or was it the result of seizure and forced sale?

During my research, a colleague at the museum came into contact with a history teacher in Wesseling, near Cologne, who has a file with various business documents from Hildebrand Gurlitt from 1943-44. He had acquired the documents from his 80-year-old uncle, a freelance artist living in Düsseldorf, who recovered the files in 1966 or 1967 from the former home of the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle museum, one day before it was demolished. Touring the building, he spotted the documents in a locked room. With only enough clearance to fit his hand, he reached in and grabbed a small stack of papers. He took the dusty documents and read them the very same evening and decided to return and recover additional documents. But when he returned to the museum the next day he found only rubble. He is certain that the rest of the documents in the room were destroyed. This interesting tale provided me with an additional motive to further acquaint myself with Hildebrand Gurlitt.

This paper will summarize the results of my investigations to date into Gurlitt's art-dealing activities. I will not revisit the frequently remarked-upon theme of "degenerate art," but rather will bring to light Gurlitt's connections to France in the early 1940s and his work as an art dealer and special emissary for Linz.

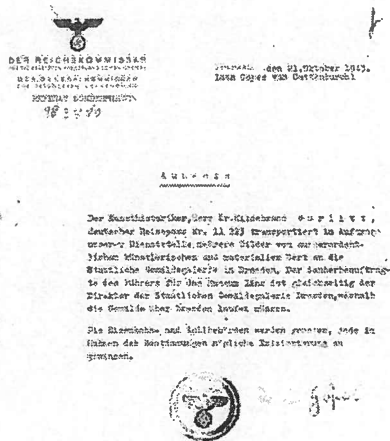
### Early Biography

Hildebrand Paul Theodor Ludwig Gurlitt was born on Sept. 15, 1895 in Dresden.<sup>2</sup> He was the second and youngest son of the art historian Dr. Cornelius Gurlitt (1850-1939) and a cousin of the equally well-known Berlin art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt (1888-1965), whose collection is located today in Linz.<sup>3</sup> In National Socialist (NS) racial terminology, both Wolfgang and Hildebrand were dubbed "second-degree mixed Jews" or "quarter Jews."<sup>4</sup>

After his military service (1914-18), Hildebrand Gurlitt began his studies in music and the fine arts in Berlin, Frankfurt, Dresden, and Heidelberg. He completed his course work in Frankfurt-Main with a doctoral thesis on architecture in Saxony. In the early 1920s he worked as an assistant at the Provincial Conservatory in Brandenburg and wrote critiques for various periodicals, including *Voss, Deutsche Allgemeine, Frankfurter Zeitung*, and several newspapers in Dresden. From 1922 to 1925 he was assistant for the architecture collection and for the art history institute at the Technical University of Dresden.

In 1923 Hildebrand Gurlitt married Helene Hanke, a dancer from Dresden, who later gave birth to a son and a daughter. He became director of the König-Albert Museum in Zwickau in 1925, and took over the business dealings of the Zwickau Art Society the following year. Through his initiative a new museum was opened in Zwickau that same year. With a modern sensibility, Gurlitt patronized artists such as Pechstein, Klee, Kollwitz, Barlach, Nolde, and Schmidt-Rottluff. Due to growing political pressure against collecting and exhibiting modern art, he was forced to resign his post, ostensibly because of the poor financial situation of the city of Zwickau. He took a temporary position teaching at the Kunstgewerbeakademie (Applied Arts Academy) in Dresden, 1929-30.

In 1930 Gurlitt became director and chairman of the Kunstverein (Arts Society) in Hamburg, but he was again relieved of his post by the NS party in 1933. The connoisseur and patron of modern art had to settle for working as an art dealer in Hamburg. Gurlitt was one of only four dealers commissioned to trade in "degenerate art" (along with Bernhard A. Boehmer, Karl Buchholz, and Ferdinand Möller).<sup>5</sup> He got access to the Berliner Reichslager (storage facility) for confiscated art from which legitimate drawings, watercolors, paintings, and sculptures were sold to various collectors after 1937. It is worth noting that Hildebrand Gurlitt was never an NS party member.



Above: Hildebrand Gurlitt.  
Reproduced with permission from *Kaest in der Krise* by Maike Brubius (Hamburg, 2001).

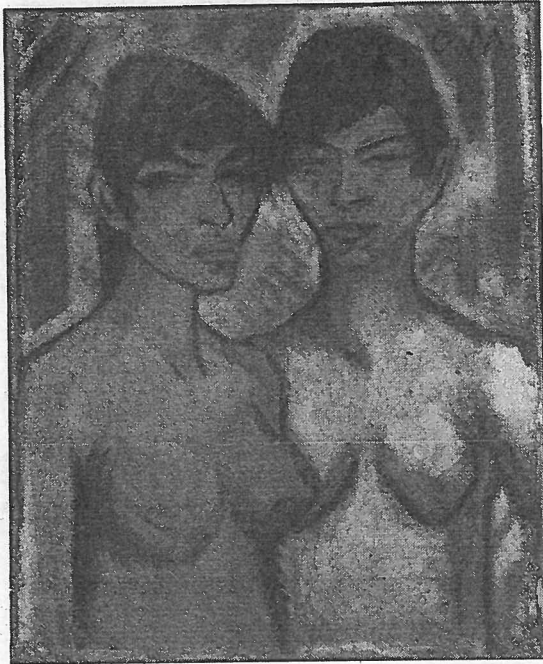
Left: Hildebrand Gurlitt's identification card, 1943. Private collection.

### The 1940s

After German forces invaded and occupied France in 1940, Gurlitt began practicing his trade as an art dealer there. He purchased works of art around France, but especially in Paris, for various German museums. Several travel documents dating from the summer of 1941 point to this fact. Another travel document from Jan. 20, 1942, reads: "Reichs-German Dr. Gurlitt is purchasing artworks of great artistic and material value, commissioned by major German museums in France." All such documents bear the signature of Mr. Ceringk. In all probability, this is the signature of musicologist Dr. Heribert Ceringh. He was head of the Sonderstab Musik (special music unit) in France as of 1940.

In spring 1942 Gurlitt closed his gallery in Hamburg (Alte Rebenstrasse 6), but continued conducting business from his hometown of Dresden (Kaitzerstrasse 26). Sometime after relocating his business to Dresden, Gurlitt entered into a business arrangement with Herman Voss of the Staatliche Gemäldegalerie (State Gallery of Paintings).

Voss and Gurlitt were close friends. The two men shared similar fortunes, both had to resign from previous positions as a result of political pressure. Their friendship turned into a very important working relationship in March 1943 when Voss was called upon to direct the Staatliche Gemäldegalerie Dresden as well as to work as the special agent (Sonderbeauftragter des Führers) of the Führermuseum Linz project. Among the first decisions Voss made was to stop any more purchases from Karl Haberstock. Instead, Voss named his trusted friend Gurlitt his accredited buyer in 1943. From that time on Gurlitt was, next to a flock of up to 50 art dealers who bought for Hitler, the most important supplier to the Linz Museum. His cousin Wolfgang Gurlitt also was commissioned by Voss for a time as a buyer for the Linz collection, although he was not quite as successful or active as Hildebrand.



*Two Female Half Acts*, 1919. Otto Müller. Museum Ludwig Cologne. Reprinted with permission from Reinisches Bildarchiv Köln.

According to my previous research into his dealings, Gurlitt bought mainly from other art dealers and very rarely from private collectors. After the war, he maintained that he never dealt in art that was not voluntarily put up for sale. As a dealer he had contacts with numerous trusted middlemen, beginning with his own family. His business contacts ultimately included numerous museums and dealers. In France, Gurlitt had contacts with Hugo Engel, Theo Hermsea, Etienne Ader, and Gustav Rochlitz among others.

After the war, the Art Looting Investigation Unit (ALIUI) concluded that Gurlitt was of no particular importance as a buyer. According to S. Lane Faison's *Consolidated Interrogation Report No. 4: Linz Hitler's Museum and Library*, "The importance of Gurlitt as an agent for Linz seems to have been exaggerated in previous reports. The quantity of his purchase is not very large, and his name does not appear in Roger's register."<sup>6</sup> Many subsequent publications support the report.

Birgit Schwarz's recent publication, *Hitler's Museum: The Photo Album of the Linz Art Gallery*, sheds new light on the exact details of Gurlitt's purchases for the Führermuseum in Linz. According to Schwarz, Gurlitt took part in at least 24 purchases of paintings for the Linz gallery. Almost all of these paintings originated from private collections in France, as did many of his purchases for the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. The first and last of the purchases for Linz were on Sept. 3, 1943, and June 28, 1944, respectively. The Gurlitt correspondence found in Düsseldorf covers precisely this time period (1943-44) and provides information about purchases for museums and collectors, bank transactions, currency dealings by the exchange control office (Dresdner Bank, Dresden/Paris and Crédit Lyonnais, Paris), other agents, and art dealers.

Voss's papers reveal that five other works were all "acquired from [H.C.] for the Führer's purposes," as Voss noted in a letter written to Curlitt in Dresden on Sept. 4, 1944. These five included four paintings and a plaster bust by Houdon.<sup>7</sup> Apart from a few leads about the regional origins of the artworks, the documents include almost no information on the previous owners. As in Cologne, most of the works were returned to France after the war.

#### **Purchases for Museums**

The Düsseldorf documents include evidence of business transactions with numerous museums. These include the Städtisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt; Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte (Museum for Art and Cultural History), Dortmund; Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen (Bavarian State Collection of Art), Munich; Kunsthalle und Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, Hamburg; Herzogliche Anstalten für Kunst und Wissenschaft (Ducal Institution for Art and Science), Gotha; Museum der Bildenden Künste (Museum of the Fine Arts), Leipzig; Städtische Museen, Cologne; Nationalgalerie, Berlin, and, of course, the Staatliche Gemäldegalerie (State Gallery of Paintings), Dresden. As the head office of the Dresdner Bank in Berlin noted in 1944, "Dr. Curlitt works mainly with leading city and national museums. It is especially to be noted that substantial contracts are currently being finalized with the special emissaries of the Führer in Linz at the State Gallery of Paintings in Dresden."<sup>8</sup> Works traded to these museums include those of well-known artists such as Monet, Boucher, Courbet, Corot, Denis, Maillol, Murillo, Rodin, Tiepolo, Spranger, van Dyck, Thoma, and Rayski.

Apart from sales to museums, Curlitt also dealt important works of art to Hans Lange, Hermann (E.) Recmetsma, Josef Haubrich, Carl Neumann, Margit and Bernhard Sprengel, and Joseph Goebbels, among others. In July 1943 he received an order stating that, as a result of new currency control regulations, "it is required that these imported paintings and drawings are solely to be used for purposes pertaining to state and local museums or other facilities. Private sales are prohibited."<sup>9</sup>

#### **Bank Transactions**

By early 1943 Curlitt's banking was carried out through a newly created account with the Dresdner Bank in Dresden.<sup>10</sup> Currency authorizations for the purchases in France also were calculated at this bank. Reviewing a request from Curlitt for a loan in February 1944, the Dresdner Bank noted that he was "in possession of great personal means." It is also noted that not long after the account was opened over 3.7 million RM already had passed through the account. The loan was authorized for 100,000 RM and permission for more than this was granted for a short time. Numerous statements from the Dresdner Bank document Curlitt's active trading of art during this time. During a few months in the summer of 1944 he traded or arranged sales or purchases of works of art worth several million Reichsmarks, earning a commission from each transaction. As a result of these transactions, Curlitt managed to amass a remarkable wartime fortune.

In addition to his account with Dresdner Bank, Curlitt also banked with the Bankhaus Wilhelm Rée in Hamburg, where he kept a large deposit and enjoyed a healthy credit line of 200,000 RM.

#### **The Postwar Years**

In March 1945 Curlitt fled with his family from Dresden to the castle of Baron von Pöllnitz in Aschberg, near Bamberg. Baron von Pöllnitz, a Luftwaffe officer, was considered the representative of the Paris art dealers. At this time the art dealer Karl Haberstock, another friend of the

baron, temporarily resided in Aschberg.

Curlitt remained at the Aschberg castle under house arrest during the Allied occupation, and gave a sworn statement to representatives of Judge Advocate Section, 3rd U.S. Army, in June 1945. His statement "included an itemized list of more than 20 boxes of works of art transported from Dresden, which he states are his own. Some of these are heirlooms, but many were bought during the war in Paris or Amsterdam. The boxes are at Aschbach." I have not been able to determine the contents of these 20 boxes or the present location of the objects they contained. Curlitt's 1956 obituary, however, refers to his splendid private collection, which contained watercolors by modern and German expressionist painters. It is believed that he acquired these works during the National Socialist years. The collection was exhibited several times internationally and even toured the United States in 1955.<sup>11</sup>

Hildebrand Curlitt remained in Aschbach-Oberfranken until 1947. In the summer of that year he asked Prof. Otto H. Förster—the former director of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, who had been relieved of his duties in 1945—to give a sworn statement in connection with a public lawsuit against him. Förster already had been helping Curlitt find new work. The former museum director now confirmed that he had helped Curlitt obtain a French visa. The following grounds were given by Curlitt: "1) because you knew me as an expert of the field who truly understood your anti-Nazi museum plans. 2) because you knew, that as an anti-fascist and a mixed Jew, that I would behave in a tactful manner in France. 3) because you knew that, as a mixed Jew, I was in extreme danger and hardship and could keep myself hidden much easier in France." Curlitt arranged for Förster to give this deposition to prove that he went to France not as a result of his Nazi contacts, but as one who was against the Nazis and persecuted by them. The court case in which the deposition was to be given also concerned Karl Haberstock; notably, Haberstock claimed in his defense that Curlitt and he were the same.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of 1947, Curlitt was appointed director of the Society of the Arts for the Rhineland and Westfalia in Düsseldorf. Otto H. Förster was instrumental in securing this appointment.<sup>13</sup> In 1953 Curlitt made great efforts to organize restitutions to France from the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne.<sup>14</sup> On Nov. 9, 1956, he passed away at the age of 61 after a serious automobile accident. In his obituaries and subsequent biographies, his activities during the Nazi era were largely omitted. His obituary in the *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* (Düsseldorf News) stated: "Curlitt weathered the years of darkness through his humble work as an art dealer." At the end of the 1950s, a street in the old town of Düsseldorf was named after the "beloved" Hildebrand Curlitt.

#### Summary

Hildebrand Curlitt was one of the most important and active art dealers during the Nazi era. Nonetheless, his activities in France at the beginning of the 1940s have yet to be closely examined, perhaps because the magnitude of his dealings for museums and private customers has long been underestimated. The inventory of objects that passed through Curlitt to Germany beginning in the early 1940s also requires thorough investigation. In addition to the numerous paintings and sculptures he traded, it is yet to be determined how many drawings and graphic arts objects also passed through his hands. That said, we can certainly conclude that Hildebrand Curlitt not only dealt in "degenerate art" but also in looted art on a large scale. More works of art are now believed to have made their way from France to Germany through his activities than was previously thought. For this reason, all works that were been procured by him should be treated with the utmost attention, particularly with regard to the conditions of their procurement, and should be researched for evidence of forced sales.



## Notes

1. Katja Terlau, "Das Wallraf-Richartz-Museum between 1933-1945," *Museen im Zwielicht*, Magdeburg 2002, pp. 21-39.
2. Exhibition Catalogue Zwickau 1999: *Hildebrand Gurlitt*.
3. See also [www.linz.at/archiv/gurlitt/inhalt.htm](http://www.linz.at/archiv/gurlitt/inhalt.htm).
4. See [www.linz.at/archiv/gurlitt/probleme.htm](http://www.linz.at/archiv/gurlitt/probleme.htm).
5. Eugen Blume and Dieter Scholz, *Überbrückt. Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus—Kunsthistoriker und Künstler 1923-1937*. Cologne 1999, p. 281; Zuschlag, Christoph, *Entartete Kunst*. Worms 1995, pp. 215-16.
6. S. Lane Faison, *Consolidated Interrogation Report No. 4. Linz. Hitler's Museum and Library*. OSS Report, Washington, D.C., Dec. 15, 1945, p. 51.
7. Joseph Vernet, *Nächtliche Hafenszene*, RM 40.000; A. L. Girodet-Trioson, *Bildnis der Königin Hortense*, RM 25.000; Willem van Dies, *Sesselsucht*, RM 25.000; Österreichischer Meister um 1850, *Junges Mädchen mit Liebhaber*, RM 10.000; Houdon, *Gipsbüste des Prinzen von Preussen*, RM 17.500. The painting by Vernet later found itself at WRM.
8. Filialbüro Dresden A-G, Historical Archive of Dresdner Bank, Dresdner Bank A.G., Frankfurt am Main, Document of Berliner Direktion der Dresdner Bank vom 5.2.1944.
9. Business Correspondence Files of Gurlitt, Private, Correspondence Dresdner Bank, Paris, from July 12, 1943 to Dr. Gurlitt.
10. Branch office Dresden A-G, Historic Archive of the Dresdner Bank, Dresdner Bank A.G., Frankfurt am Main, Statement of Berliner director of Dresdner Bank from 5.2.1944.
11. *Rheinische Post*, Nov., 10, 1956.
12. Historic Archives of the City of Cologne, Best. 1232 Nr. 71, Bl., Letter Dr. H. Gurlitt to Förster from June 12, 1947.
13. "... Otto Heimit Förster ... let it be known that Dr. Hildebrand Gurlitt, former director of the Hamburg Society of the arts, is seeking work." From the file "Gurlitt," Düsseldorf Society of the Arts.
14. Correspondence from Oct. 27, 1953, Prof. Dr. Reidemeister to the Administration for the Arts and Culture of the City of Cologne, file "Restitutions to France—General Correspondence," p. 205, WRM Archive.