

Museum porcelain may have been looted by Nazis

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Items in two of Britain's most popular museums are suspected of having been looted by the Nazis during the "biggest art theft in history".

The Victoria and Albert and Ashmolean museums are assisting a government committee that is investigating whether Meissen porcelain pieces they exhibit were stolen.

The revelation follows the publication of a report by the Government's Spoliation Advisory Panel, which recommended that the Tate return a John Constable painting that had been looted from a Hungarian collector during the Second World War.

It is understood that the advisory

panel — set up to resolve claims from people or their heirs who lost property during the Nazi era — is continuing to look at a "small" number of other cases involving British institutions.

The Meissen porcelain is believed to have belonged to Emma Budge, a German collector who died in Hamburg in 1937. The Nazis appropriated much of her collection and sold it at auction. Her will is understood to have a number of codicils inserted when Ms Budge "realised what was happening in Germany" according to one source, which has complicated inquiries.

The Meissen factory in Germany is one of the world's most famous, with the V&A holding an extensive collection of pieces. It confirmed that three

were under investigation. The advisory panel was set up in 2000 to establish whether artworks under British ownership were among the millions of works amassed by the Nazis, in what is often described as the biggest art theft in history.

Five countries, including Britain, set up national commissions to establish the provenance of various pieces.

One source said that British institutions had acquired pieces in good faith, adding that it was "very tough" on them if they had to hand them back.

After publication of the panel's report this week into the provenance of its 1824 John Constable work *Beaching a Boat, Brighton*, the Tate said that it would recommend to the gallery's trus-



Meissen porcelain: the two museums acquired their pieces in good faith

tees that the painting be returned to the claimants. The panel had concluded that the Constable had been taken from its Hungarian owner, Baron Ferenc Hatvany, "in the course of anti-Semitic persecution of the collector and his

family by the German occupying forces". The panel said that Hatvany's heirs had a "strong moral claim for the restitution of the painting". Its report questioned the diligence of the gallery, which was given the painting in 1986 by a private collector, in establishing its ownership history.

A spokesman for the V&A said yesterday: "Three Meissen figures held in the V&A collection are being considered by the Spoliation Advisory Panel in response to an official claim. The V&A is following all due procedures and will act in accordance with the panel's findings."

The Ashmolean said that it could not comment as the person in charge of the relevant collection was unavailable.