

Michaela Howse

THE ART OF GOLDEN REPAIR

A PERSONAL VIEW ON
THE UNIQUE WORK
OF JUSTICE IN RESTITUTION
AND REMEMBRANCE CULTURE

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

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A Personal View on the Unique Work of Justice in Restitution and Remembrance Culture

Michaela Howse

Gold is elusive. It has to be mined. One moves through layers of sediment and rock to reach the precious material, as researchers, similarly excavate contexts around the pieces, the objects, that come to capture our histories. Many contexts – cultural, political and personal – define their significance.

Having lived in South Africa for 39 years and through a life immersed in culture, I realize this is a country deeply seeped in the political. It is a nation forged from difference. Accepting difference, while simultaneously attempting to cohere as a society and to communicate shared experience becomes a pertinent quest, but simultaneously the perfect means to be divided politically. Two years of teaching at Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) has revealed a different situation from the more prestigious universities in South Africa. Today, when teaching and designing material, we cannot take for granted what a student will have been exposed to during their school careers. Many students I teach currently support their families on a government study bursary roughly to the value of ZAR 1000, approximately 54 Euros, which must also cover their transport, food and materials. On the occasions of meeting children from rural settings, it cannot be assumed they have used a flush toilet.

I am reminded of a scene many years ago in Amsterdam, when on a tram, I found myself unconsciously noting the different races of the people travelling, deeply impressed, at the time, by just how Dutch everybody seemed. At home this was not the case. South Africans were moving in unique ways, along different trajectories, speaking various languages, emerging from a country divided economically and geographically along racial lines, without any unifying culture or language. My experience of South Africa over the last 25 years only echoes the reality we face as lecturers at universities today, dealing with such heterogeneity in the student body. Political leadership, the development of policy, and even education face the constant challenge of inclusivity while simultaneously maintaining exceptional quality and unified outcomes. Respect for difference, in a journey together of such complexity, culturally and historically, for common goals like peace, prosperity and economic flourishing is a rich, but challenging undertaking.

The extreme heterogeneity we face as individuals in a young nation with a divided past prepares one for the complexities inherent in global processes of reconciliation and the goals of peace. When learning of the many justice systems that are implemented across the globe and the attempts by countries to guide their people to peace after a past marked by violence and conflict, the very heterogeneity of human experience becomes clear. People do not 'move on' in predictable or uniform ways. An experience of any conflict or war is so personal. What is justice for one, is not justice for all. Forgiveness is not a given, and at times even to consider forgiveness feels unforgiveable. Jean Améry, a survivor of the worst violence of the Holocaust, took his own life in 1978. An advocate for reconciliation between people, but not with the past, he wrote that, "Man has the right and the privilege to declare

himself in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about. What happened, happened. This sentence is as true as it is hostile to morals and intellects". In spite of a version of truth being revealed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, an individual process of moving on is made clear by Joyce Mtimkulu, whose son went missing in Port Elizabeth in the 1990s. "I have not forgiven them, why must I forgive them when they don't want to tell the truth, and the beauty of this is that they are not asking for forgiveness from us, the people who have lost their beloved ones. They are asking forgiveness from the government, they did nothing to the government, what they did, they did to us". Similar feelings are summed up in the memoir by Rwandan genocide survivor Clemantine Wamayira in her resolve to keep history personal rather than collude with collective movements that may carry one for a time.

"This – Rwanda, my life – is a different, specific, personal tragedy, just as each of those horrors was a different, specific, personal tragedy, and inside all those tidily labeled boxes are 6 million, or 1,7 million, or 100000, or 100 billion lives destroyed. You cannot line up the atrocities like a matching set. You cannot bear witness with a single word [genocide]."³

What can be assumed collectively of a nation's resolve when it comes to past events, and to injustice, has its limits. Although on a national level, especially in a transitional justice context, reconciliation might drive policy and development, it still cannot override the trajectory of an individual's experience of what justice means. Is justice the ultimate reconciliation, a place reached? Or is justice, on the other hand, something never final, but rather a thing that haunts and becomes daily work, that shifts, derived from a subtle sense of what is just and fair?

If an experience of injustice, which is perhaps easier to know, is personal, it is also very vulnerable to political narratives that try to explain the reasons for discomfort. Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa, elucidates political divisiveness so well in his address at Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's funeral on 14 April 2018. "Long live the defiant spirit of Winnie Mandela, long live! Forward to expropriation of land without compensation, forward!" he chants.4 Adam Heribert elucidates how Malema invokes the spirit of Winnie Mandela, an icon, propagating the division between those in support of Nelson Mandela's negotiated settlement and non-racial future and those who believe they have been sold out. "Big Mama, some of those who sold you to the regime are here! They are crying louder than all of us who cared for you [...] Some of them have played prominent roles in your funeral. In a funeral of a person they called a criminal [...] a person they were ready to humiliate in front of the whole world. Mama, I'm waiting for a signal on how we should treat them".5 Malema's rhetoric works well to harness the injustice of poverty and history yet so often denies "historical time" as historian Timothy Snyder terms it. 6 This is the time during which South Africa's problems have "mutated"⁷ to include rampant corruption and the siphoning of funds by leadership, funds that never reach the people who require basic services. Ours is a vulnerable populace at the whims of the best storytellers, who prey on the illiterate, poorly educated, and isolated with simple solutions founded on selective memory, replete with convenient scapegoats. There is no copyright on history and no regulatory body overseeing its use.

The late historian Klemens von Klemperer (and family member), in his description of Germany in *German Incertitudes: 1914–1945*, makes an interesting point about political strength requiring a certain coherence. "Ill-defined as Germany has been in her history, she has been in all her political fragmentation less than a state and more than a state, a virtual jungle of principalities, free cities and ecclesiastical territories [...] The multiplicity of quasi-sovereign units, then, spelled cultural affluence and political impotence and, in the nineteenth century, a correspondingly aggressive nationalism". Germany's cultural heterogeneity also meant its political vulnerability.



1-From left: Lili, Babette, Hubert, Mika, Ralph and Fritz von Klemperer in 1936 in Davos, Switzerland

It is perhaps an act of courage to hold onto one's unique experience, like Wamariya, Améry and Mtimkulu, and to resist more politically expedient ways of moving on. James E. Young, academic, author and expert on memorial culture, alludes to the necessity for the category of a nation's "collected memories", rather than national "collective memory", precisely because in a democratic age, history is made up of the stories of individuals, rather than captured and fixed in "monolithic" narratives and actual monuments. The only danger is that collected memories are more vulnerable to division because memories themselves are fragile and subject to time. Those concerned in restorative work when it comes to memory, are in fact concerned with the restoration of historical truth and hence theirs is also justice work.

The growing acknowledgement of the vulnerability of personal memory, accompanied by a global reckoning and need to account for the past – which is, according to the late historian Tony Judt, precipitated by Europe's need to account for the Holocaust¹⁰ – has given rise to what Susan Sontag called the "memory museum"¹¹.

This is a pedagogical attempt to secure the past, not only because of the realization of memory's fragility, but also because memory is an essential pillar of justice. But "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" as George Orwell so aptly put it in his novel 1984. To claim public memory is inherently political. To secure 'collected memories' comes with the utmost responsibility, a stake in the welfare of people, and hopefully, the belief that the truth, however complex, is what is good for us all in the long term. To be a memory worker, a kind of curator of the past, is as serious and important as being an art restorer in the attempt to return something that is



2 — Ida Charlotte von Klemperer, my grandmother Mika, before 1937



3 — Ludwig Abel, my grandfather, before 1937

subject to time and decay to its original state as far as possible, and with the same accuracy. The passion of the historian, the provenance researcher, and the memory worker should be the truth, in all of its messy complexity. This truth is intricately tied to material culture, to what we do with and about things. Their place in the world and true ontology is a form of justice. Often things are the only 'memory' remaining for people who have lost the original context for their lives, through war and genocide especially.

In my own need for reckoning with the past and for complex truths, I returned to the city of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) three years ago, to the home of my childhood, my mother and my beloved late grandparents who met here in 1937. Ralph von Klemperer, the youngest son of the collectors Gustav and Charlotte von Klemperer, my gran's father, decided to leave Dresden with his family in 1937 after being warned by close friends in government that they could no longer assure the family's safety (fig. 1). They obtained passage on one of the last German boats for South Africa. Along with his two older brothers, Victor and Herbert, Ralph was heir to one third of the famous Meissen porcelain collection. Ralph had wanted to take his portion to South Africa, but his brothers, still in disbelief that the move was essential, felt that Africa was not the place for Meissen porcelain. (Ironically, this is where many fragments of the collection have ended up, however, after being fire-bombed in Dresden and buried underground). My grandfather, Ludwig Abel, forbidden from completing his law degree in Germany, was forced to enter the wool trade and was sent by his father to South Africa. My grandfather had been sharing a flat with my grandmother's older brother, Hubert, who too had been sent by his father as an envoy to a different world. This picture of my gran, Ida Charlotte (or Mika as she was known), was in their shared flat and enchanted my grandfather (fig. 2). He met my grandmother on her arrival in South Africa on her 18th birthday, June 19, 1937 and they fell in love, much to the disappointment of my gran's father. Ralph bemoaned the fact that he had brought his family thousands of miles from Germany only for his daughter to fall in love with the first German Jew she laid her eyes upon (fig. 3).

On returning to Port Elizabeth my intentions were to process, through writing predominantly, more intimate reflections on inheritance, on what gets handed down, that I could not explore in an academic way. Questions were unearthed through a Visual Arts Master's that became *A Journey in Curatorship of Inherited Meissen Porcelain Shards*. The broken Meissen porcelain from my ancestors' collection, these vestiges from a once world-famous collection, reverberate with family history, Dresden's history, questions of Jewishness, identity, vulnerability, and inheritance. The uncanny material reality of these broken things gave a physical body to feelings that, without the help of metaphor, were unintelligible. The broken porcelain fragments that were restituted by the Dresden Porcelain Collection to the family in 2010 are undeniable witnesses to both violence and love, to the collision between the desire to have at any cost, and centuries of nurture for things of the utmost fragility, for culture, and life itself.

Susan Pearce explains: "There are differences between the discourse of language and of material culture and one of the most important of these is that, like ourselves but unlike words, objects have a brutally physical existence, each occupying its own place in time and space. This means that objects, again unlike words, always retain an intrinsic link with the original context from which they came because they are always the stuff of its stuff no matter how much they may be repeatedly reinterpreted." ¹²



4 — Ancient gran Mika, Ida Charlotte Abel (von Klemperer), 2015

We are not dissimilar as human beings. It becomes clear with time that who we are cannot be divorced from those contexts that informed our mothers, and their mothers and grandmothers. My mother was born in South Africa in 1942 to refugee parents, and to grandparents who narrowly escaped Nazi Germany. She grew up with terrifying stories of her grandparents' threatening encounters with officialdom in their attempt to leave Germany. Once as a child, looking for crayons in a cupboard, she came across a letter written by her ouma's sister, the last letter before deportation of her and her husband to their death. But as children we have no frameworks to identify feelings. I believe they simply become us (fig. 4).

I spent days and months at a time with my grandmother in the last years of her life. We would sit outside in the sunshine with the bougainvillea always an assault of purple flowers. I would look at the crack in the boundary wall behind the straggling plants. (Gran was not much of a gardener). The cottage was not glamorous or big, but suited gran. "Hitler will never know what he did for us", she would say. The sunshine was her justice. So was granny and grandpa's life in a country replete with mountains



5 – Gran Mika, me and mom, Lynne Howse, 2003

to climb and flowers to discover, with a general sense of being left alone to live quietly without spotlight or pressure. I think this fulfilled her and brought her peace. Nevertheless, her justice still carries a weight. I live with the knowledge of context, of the backdrop to their love, and survival.

Gran never spoke about suffering until a few years before her death. Being 'white' in South Africa came to eclipse any possible feelings of victimhood in our family. In the twist of fate of moving between Germany and South Africa, two countries ideologically linked in the same racist firmament, in South Africa, unlawful laws were enforced on the basis of skin colour. Hence, we were brought up understanding the responsibilities of privilege, with an embedded tradition of service. In the days and nights together when gran and I would reminisce, there were lucid and less lucid moments. Gran would break into song, into perfectly remembered renditions of *Die Fahne hoch*, of all things. She knew the Nazi anthems by heart. My gran – no doubt still hurt from having been prevented to sing with her school class because she was tone deaf and was told that she ruined it by her teachers – my gran – who was forced to take piano lessons when really she would have loved to learn to draw – my gran – who wanted to join the Hitler youth as a young adolescent simply to belong – my gran belted out her songs and seemed to access a childlike joy and pain simultaneously in a sung justice that forgot sense and decorum. In the end, we laughed until we cried. And gran admitted to how hard it was as a German Jewish refugee in South Africa, hated as an enemy alien and distrusted as a Jew (fig. 5).

We need time together as generations to exchange and let go, together, so that younger generations have the images and words for both the joys and the shadows of their lives. I could draw my grand-mother while she slept. When I showed her a drawing, she remarked that she didn't look Jewish, but that she very much was. I believe she was reconciled when she died, with her life post-Germany that was without prestige, but that was kind, was everything she was. Nevertheless, something inescapable has been handed down. Memories of waltzing on my grandfather's German sandals to a beautiful record, the grace of the finely crafted French tables with their antique legs and corners and soft fresh flowers in vases – the things unsaid have accumulated to leave an experience of love, hard to bear without pathos, and beauty itself, impossible to behold without an excruciating sense of its cost.



6 — Plate with bird decoration, porcelain, Meissen, c. 1760Restituted by the Dresden Porcelain Collection to the descendants of Gustav von Klemperer in 2010, since 2010 Edmund de Waal Collection, London

Soon after the inauguration of President Joe Biden and the delivery of Amanda Gorman's poem, a small article was sent to me by a friend about the reverberating themes of fragments and incompleteness. The article referred not only to Gorman's poem, but to *kintsugi*, the Japanese method of repairing broken porcelain with gold. The image in the article of the repaired vessel struck me. I have known about *kintsugi*, but seeing this vessel, it sunk in – this was something exceptionally beautiful. Edmund de Waal, author, porcelain artist and inheritor of a famous collection of *netsuke* which belonged to his Jewish ancestors, wrote the catalogue essay for the Bonhams auction in 2010 of some of the restituted Meissen pieces belonging to my family. He also bought eight broken plates of my family's collection that were on auction. De Waal had the plates 'repaired' in the method of *kintsugi*. It highlights the value of provenance, that yes, what led to the plates becoming broken is golden – the history of the collection and my family's history. The image of the vessel in the article moved me to determination, however, not to meet the material challenge of repair, but rather, to determine what it means *to live* the gold, to have golden thoughts and take golden action. What might it mean as citizens of a country and individuals to find the metaphorical gold, a material stronger and more valuable than the pieces rendered broken by conflict and war?

"Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole". Derek Walcott, the Saint Lucian poet, upon winning the Nobel prize in literature describes a kind of love that may slow down 'progress'. He describes the love of his Antillean landscape, the acceptance of the 'imperfection' that may be the judgement of some. Yet he celebrates the perfection of a moment in time so replete with history and simultaneously without history, a moment with a past, yes, but a past that has no greater hold over the wonders of the present. This is a love that transcends divisive controls. It is principled and life-affirming. Such love is the work required in South Africa, but possibly the need reverberates around a world divided and hurting. Today, every step that emerges from a world of fragments must be of a finer material. It must be stronger than before. Thought and action must transcend categories of the past that fix groups as perpetrators, bystanders, victims, categorization that is no longer useful. The future needs more than blame of the past. It requires Walcott's love, golden action in the present, with a simultaneous shared commitment to the restoration of memory that makes a just future possible.

In 2019 the curator of the Dresden Porcelain Collection, Anette Loesch, wrote to us about the proposal of the museum to embark on a research project to document the outstanding losses of my great-great-grandparents' porcelain collection. Only four out of twenty-five crates the collection was packed into while in Nazi possession were on the lorry parked in the main courtyard of the *Rezidenzschloss* on the night Dresden was bombed. Twenty-one out of twenty-five crates of the collection of 836 pieces in total are missing. The idea behind the research project was not only to document the missing pieces and make sure they would be captured on the lost art database, but also to learn more of what the family would have endured before fleeing Germany.

A year previously, in 2018, I visited the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism. From the foundations of Nazism in Munich, literally, on the site of the original Brown House, the centre has been built to tell the story from the inside of how National Socialism came to its full strength in Germany. It is a profound act of responsibility. It is empowering to learn of the origins and rise of the movement, different from visiting another commemoration site of victims of the Holocaust. The museum answers questions in a way that engenders a sense of stewardship over history. (I could only imagine a similar documentation centre about Apartheid's rise in the heart of Stellenbosch, to grow from the very foundations where some of its engineering took place. How profound a taking responsibility for one's own history and part in it this would be!)

I was indeed moved by just how progressive the centre is, but when I learnt of the proposal being put forward by the Dresden Porcelain Collection, my first thought was still that this just does not happen. Surely, for research of this nature to be undertaken, it must be fought for? Who takes it upon themselves to fight for the restoration of truth, and even possessions, on another's behalf? There is something restorative in the research proposed and valuable in light of provenance research, but in fact, profound in the nature of the gesture and thought. Axel Honneth, the German philosopher, is not alone in his emphasis on recognition as fundamental to our flourishing as people. Recognition allows us to feel and to acknowledge aspects of ourselves, but also to become who we can be. Given the need to only reinforce strength, to live through the complexities of privilege, the recognition of loss is antithetical to what is required to survive. Recognition of our loss, in fact by another, makes possible the ownership of feelings that generally one cannot afford and that have no place given the stringent constraints of our lives.

The Documentation Centre in Munich only opened four years ago in 2017. It took decades of lobbying and negotiating and needed many committed individuals from city initiatives, district groups, regional committees, political parties and media to share a sense of what was needed. The first restitution of

my family's porcelain took place in 1991. 86 pieces were returned, and my ancestors decided to donate three quarters back to the Dresden Porcelain Collection, the memory of Gustav and Charlotte von Klemperer foremost in their minds. The value of that decision cannot be underestimated. As descendants, the collection in the museum with corresponding signs 'gift of the family von Klemperer' secures the memory of our family in Dresden and allows us an historical sense of place. In the context of genocide, that seeks to eradicate all trace of a group's lives, these pieces remain. A relationship of reciprocity and mutual respect between our family and the people connected with the museum began, one which has grown from strength to strength. After the second restitution of fragments in 2010 came the motivation for reunion. 170 descendants of Charlotte and Gustav von Klemperer descended upon Dresden for three days of connecting with one other and learning of the family's history. During the reunion we received a gift from the city of Dresden, a piece of the old *Frauenkirche* which had lain as rubble for years before being rebuilt. This, yet another material link, binds us together to a shared place and history.

On 3 December 1998, 44 governments participating in the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets agreed on 11 principles for managing Nazi-looted art, known as the Washington Principles. The principles are clear, but so are the criticisms that not enough has been done in the 23 years since their inception. While access to privately held information and the resources committed by institutions to provenance research pose setbacks, honouring these principles still requires individuals, I believe, with a profound sense of what justice means. This conviction and sense are needed to turn the abstract phrase from the Washington Principles' recommendation of "just and fair solutions" into reality.

In our case, we recognize this sense, of Anette Loesch's in particular, and the team that has supported her. Before the Washington Principles were formulated, the director of the Dresden State Art Collections, Werner Schmidt, ensured the commitment to the first restitution in 1991. Anette Loesch was at the museum at that time. Gilbert Lupfer, part of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden since 2002, led the Daphne-Project and the systematic research into collection holdings which enabled the second restitution after the fragments were identified. Corina Sallani-Geißdorf worked tirelessly with Anette Loesch in the *Porzellansammlung* to painstakingly piece together our broken history, meeting her soon-to-be-husband Michael Geißdorf who was providing the legal support. The research project funded by the German Lost Art Foundation has been led by Anette Loesch and carried out by Kathrin Iselt with the essential support of the Porcelain Collection director, Julia Weber. Apart from Werner Schmidt, we are privileged to know personally this exceptional team of warm and courageous people.

On 19 July 2018 Thuli Madonsela, South Africa's former public protector, gave a special address at Nelson Mandela University in which she bemoaned that which prevents people from the kinds of generous actions that are of benefit to us all. Madonsela referred to James Patrick Kinney's poem *The Cold Within*. It describes different types of people standing around a fire which is dying, but each person is too selfish to throw in his or her log, for fear that it will benefit a person who is not like them. In the end, the fire dies, and as Kinney writes of the people, "They didn't die from the cold without, They died from the cold within".

In the context of restitution, it is important to realize just how apt Madonsela's use of Kinney's poem is. Though intended for the South African context, it draws a parallel with the unspoken anxiety that troubles the world of restitution – of giving back – and the associated fear of losing. The ultimate purpose of museums is to preserve and care for the material vestiges of culture, to serve as responsible custodians of what has value to societies for perpetuity. This principal function is threatened

by reparations. With the rise of provenance research, it becomes clearer how many objects in museums and galleries have become museum property due to unethical, unlawful means. Hence there begins an anxious conflation of ethics and traditional purpose, of what determines one's responsibility as caretakers of culture. Definitions of curatorship from the Latin *curare* 'to care for' require critical redefinition. Where, and for whom, does the object hold the most value? What is the right thing to do? And thinking in Madonsela's way about justice, what truly is the fire that warms us all?

Since the first restitution in 1991 till today, the relationship of reciprocity begun by my ancestors between the family and the Dresden Porcelain Collection continues. The inherent question of what justice is and the tasks of restoration in all respects extends through this commitment. Respect for the memory of lives may slow things down and muddy politics, but it enriches us culturally. From all sides in this journey is the deep respect we share for life, for memories, and for what is just and fair, which is a process, rather than an end.

It must be tremendously frightening for museums to 'let go', but at the same time, there is the possibility for new beginnings. Could it not be the case there are more of us than we imagine on the side of golden repair?

The agency of the objects like the broken porcelain fragments and their exchange has helped forge and define a reciprocal relationship of respect and trust. Across divides, we share values, and across continents, memories of place. Enough time has been spent among fragments. The Dresden Porcelain Collection and the Dresden State Art Collections set a precedent of golden action. They have placed their log into the fire. Love risks, does not control, knows there is a fire that warms us all. In the context of post-conflict incompleteness, I think if inherited porcelain fragments could talk, their advice might be to find that metaphorical gold of love and courage to build now, with a stronger material.

Notes

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- 12 Susan M. Pearce, On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition. London: Routledge, 1995, p.14.
- 13 Derek Walcott; Nobel Lecture: The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory, 1992. Available online: https://www.nobel-prize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture/ [8 March 2021].

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- 1-6 Michaela Howse, Port Elizabeth/South Africa
- 7 © Edmund de Waal, photograph: Christopher Riggio, 2019

Impressum

The present article was written in the framework of the research project 'The Reconstruction of the Porcelain Collection of the Dresden Banker Gustav von Klemperer (1852–1926)' of the Porcelain Collection of the Dresden State Art Collections, sponsored by the German Lost Art Foundation.

Publisher

Dresden State Art Collections, Porcelain Collection PSF 120 551, 01006 Dresden, Tel. (0351) 4914 2000 Email: porzellansammlung@skd.museum www.skd.museum

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Copy-editing

Jenny Brückner, Dresden State Art Collections Sina Volk, Sandstein Verlag

General editing

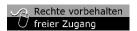
Anette Loesch, Dresden State Art Collections

Design

Simone Antonia Deutsch and Katharina Stark, Sandstein Verlag

Bibliographic information of the German National Libary

The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.



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Published on ART-Dok – Publikationsplattform Kunst- und Bildwissenschaften, Heidelberg University Library 2021.

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The Art of Golden Repair: A Personal View on the Unique Work of Justice

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72891

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7289

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007289

Michaela Howse: Die Kunst der goldenen Reparatur: Eine persönliche Sicht darauf, was es bedeutet, in der Restitutions- und Gedenkkultur Gerechtigkeit zu üben

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72954

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7295

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007295

A number of other essays were written in the framework of the research project

'The Reconstruction of the Porcelain Collection of the Dresden Banker Gustav von Klemperer (1852-1926)':

Andreas Graul

Die Bankiers Gustav und Victor von Klemperer

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72882

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7288

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007288

Andreas Graul: The Bankers Gustav and Victor von Klemperer

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72940

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7294

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007294

Kathrin Iselt

Die Dresdner Villen der Familie von Klemperer

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72900

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7290

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007290

Kathrin Iselt: The Dresden Villas of the von Klemperer Family

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72968

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7296

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007296

Anette Loesch

SAMMLUNG - RAUB - VERLUST - RESTITUTION - SCHENKUNG.

Die Porzellansammlung Gustav von Klemperers

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72866

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7286

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007286

Anette Loesch: COLLECTED - EXPROPRIATED - LOST - RESTITUTED - GIFTED:

The Gustav von Klemperer Porcelain Collection

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72925

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7292

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007292

Sabine Rudolph

Die Entziehung der Porzellansammlung Gustav von Klemperers

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72878

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7287

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007287

Sabine Rudolph: The Expropriation of the Gustav von Klemperer Porcelain Collection

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-72934

URL: http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2021/7293

DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007293

The research project was sponsored by:





The publication of the findings was sponsored by:



