

## How to Weigh a Poster: The Restitution of the Hans Sachs Poster Collection.

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The story of the Hans Sachs poster collection spans over a hundred years and two world wars. The collection was confiscated by Nazi officials in 1938 and it was kept in an archive in East Berlin until the Berlin wall fell, whereupon it became national property of a re-unified Germany. The restitution of this collection has been complicated by its shifting value – not only monetary, but national, cultural, and personal. Research on poster art and poster collecting has remained a relatively conservative field as it has focused largely on the formal analysis of posters. Historic posters are often seen as images that exist in contemporary contexts as old objects. Frozen in time, they are stripped of any agency to affect current politics. However, more recent scholarship has argued that “posters are barometers of social, economic, political and cultural events ... as well as mirrors of intellectual and practical activities.”<sup>1</sup> This perspective enables a fascinating reading of the history of Dr. Hans Sachs’s poster collection. This essay will examine the different episodes that marked the life of this unique collection including its seizure, the ensuing court case, its passage through an auction house, and finally its reproduction in catalogues. Each of these events has problematized the transformation of Sachs’s posters from ‘ad’ to ‘artwork’ and finally to ‘artifact.’

Jewish born Hans Sachs was born in Breslau, Germany in 1881, but he later moved to Berlin where he lived and worked as a dentist.<sup>2</sup> Sachs lived in Berlin until 1938 when he was forced to emigrate due to the brutal discrimination against Jews in Germany that preceded the Second World War. While his days were occupied by work as a dentist, Sachs was most notably an avid poster collector. From advertising, to propaganda, to anti-Hitler, and

(Opposite) Fig. 1. Sachs in his study. (Image courtesy: WLRN.com) URL: <http://wlrn.org/post/how-posters-stolen-nazis-resurfaced-jewish-museum-south-florida>



***“Sachs’ collection was known for its variety and quality, and so it came as no surprise when Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister – a man almost as obsessed with the graphic arts and design as Sachs – took an interest in it.”***

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art posters, Sachs was fervent and fastidious in his collecting. His poster collection grew to over 12 000 works, both large and small, and it has come to be known as one of the greatest poster collections in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Hans Sachs became interested in the graphic arts as a teenager and began collecting in 1896. In a remarkable, albeit short–autobiography published by Sachs in 1957 (and re–published by Guernsey’s auction house in 2013), he tried to recall when his passion for collecting began: “[P]erhaps it all started when I secretly exchanged the first foreign stamps under the school desk in the second preliminary school class of the Koenig–Willhems–Gymnasium in Breslau.”<sup>4</sup> After seeing several posters pinned to the bedroom walls of a schoolmate, which included a design by Otto Fischer called *Die Alte Stadt*, Sachs asked his friend how he had acquired such spectacular works. His friend promptly told him that he had simply helped himself to these pictures in the waiting rooms of railway stations.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of when his fixation on graphic art began, Sachs was discerning and critical in his selection. He collected works in which he saw “artistic merit,” and readily admits, “in this particular phase of art it is just the personal taste of the collector that counts!”<sup>6</sup>

Sachs kept his poster collection in his house, where in addition to covering the walls (Fig. 1) thousands of works were stored in fire–proof aluminum sheaths and were fastidiously organized with labels and an index card system. Following the advice of his childhood friend, Sachs would help himself to posters around the city, but he soon became more discerning and rigorous.<sup>7</sup> Increased public interest in his collection coincided with the growth of the collection itself; as such, Sachs came to realize that there was a need for an organization that would liaise like–minded collectors and function as a platform for the dissemination of knowledge. So in 1905, with Hans Meyer, another young collector –,Sachs founded the *Verein der Plakat Freunde* – The Society for the Friends of the Poster. The society’s mandate was to promote poster collecting and increase scholarship on the subject,<sup>8</sup> which they had achieved by hosting poster swaps and lectures by graphic artists and other collectors. Sachs’s home became a social and public site for the development of this field.<sup>9</sup>

In early twentieth–century Berlin, posters dominated public space and visual culture. Plastered to lampposts and buildings (Fig. 2), posters became “the medium for the construction of a pictorial rhetoric...of national identities.”<sup>10</sup> While commercial advertising and political campaigns were standard poster subjects, the turn of the twentieth–century brought on the art poster.<sup>11</sup> Many well–known European artists, such as Toulouse de Lautrec,

Kandinsky, Klimt, Mucha, and Steinlen experimented with the medium. An art historical analysis of posters can certainly serve as a starting point, however, one must remember that “posters refer to an act within a wider world, and reading them requires reconstructing that world.”<sup>12</sup> A formal analysis of a poster can prompt important political and social investigations that can effectively reconstruct its cultural context. Posters act as important markers within history, as they are able to supply “information regarding the cultural niveau” and can provide “reliable insight into the mentality of the population.”<sup>13</sup> This pedagogy of understanding is critical to the reading and writing of the history of Sachs’s poster collection; for as individual objects and as a collection, the posters provide a means through which we can understand the modes of communication and cultural production in turn-of-the-century Berlin.

In addition to The Society for the Friends of the Poster, Sachs published a journal on the subject of posters and the graphic arts called *Das Plakat* or “The Poster”. This journal began in 1910 and was an integral part of the Society’s mandate, as it enabled the wide circulation of new styles, trends, and writing on this emerging field. Each issue was devoted to a single artist who was in charge of its design, from the font to color choices and layout, which made each issue unique. *Das Plakat* was known for dealing with “unexplored aesthetic, cultural, and legal issues about posters and graphic design,”<sup>14</sup> and at its peak *Das Plakat* was circulating over 11 000 copies internationally per month.<sup>15</sup>

By 1938 Sachs collection numbered over 12 000 posters, and according to Sachs, it was “a most varied and comprehensive collection from every angle ... from the artistic [to the] sociological, cultural, psychological, historical, or geographical.”<sup>16</sup> He was particularly interested in the “forbidden, religious or zoological posters, posters of the dance or festivals, of war and revolution, even plagiarism.”<sup>17</sup> Sachs’s collection was known for its variety and quality, and so it came as no surprise when Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister — a man almost as obsessed with the graphic arts and design as Sachs — took an interest in it.

Goebbels was a notorious figure whose role as Hitler’s Propaganda Minister directly contributed to the broadcasting of Hitler’s radical ideologies throughout Germany. It has been argued that Goebbels’s propaganda tactics were largely responsible for Hitler’s swift and successful rise to power in 1933.<sup>18</sup> In a haunting autobiography by Goebbels titled *My Part in Germany’s Fight*, he writes on November 14th 1932, that “...besides our speeches, and the success of our propaganda, the Press is our only

weapon.”<sup>19</sup> According to Goebbels, successful propaganda was simple, repetitive, appealing, and credible,<sup>20</sup> and it was quickly employed as a weapon for the Nazi government.

In the winter of 1938, Sachs received a phone call from three high-powered Gestapo officers who informed him that they were to come and investigate his apartment. The officers were a part of Goebbels’s Propaganda ministry, and conveniently enough, they were all “former advertising managers for German firms,”<sup>21</sup> so they would have been well aware of Sachs’s “collecting activities, as well as the periodical ‘Das Plakat.’”<sup>22</sup> Sachs was informed that Goebbels “wished to add a new wing to the Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin to be devoted to ‘the art of the merchant.’”<sup>23</sup> This wing that was to include advertising and poster art. Modern art and art posters were considered radical and distasteful, and many of Sachs’s posters were considered to be political arsenal.<sup>24</sup> When searching his house, the Gestapo officers demanded to see any and all of Sachs’s political posters, “especially those of the last election campaigns.”<sup>25</sup> Sachs didn’t have too many of these posters, but he did have some, and he presented them to the police. His collection of anti-Hitler posters, however, was larger and he was surprised by the officers’ reactions to them. He recalls,

*“[T]he more posters of anti-Hitler content I magically produced with the aid of my card index, the more I could see their expressionless faces light up. Every moment I expected imprisonment for the possession of such objects as [they] were subversive to the state. Instead each new specimen was received with unqualified approval and something of suppressed glee.”*<sup>26</sup>

Upon deciding that Sachs’s collection should be confiscated, they seized everything and arrested Sachs. Sachs remembers this day with intensity in his 1957 memoir,

*“Three giant trucks appeared. The blackest day of my life had begun. With my own hands I took all 250 aluminum arms, each containing 50 posters from their supports, removed the bibliography with its 80 larger works and hundreds of single articles, carried out 12 full car-index boxes with 1000 cards each and the entire miniature graphic, to the trucks, where they were then carried off to the Kunstgewerbemuseum...the headquarters for the Gestapo.”*<sup>27</sup>

Sachs’ was interned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp for a short while before his wife and friends managed to negotiate his release; although how they achieved this remains unclear in all accounts of Sachs’s history.

Following his release, Sachs, his wife Felicia, and their one-year-old son Peter fled to the United States.

The war ended in 1945 and Sachs and his family had begun to rebuild a life in the United States. Even though Sachs had come to accept the impossibility of his collection having survived the war, in 1956, he contacted the Director of Public Education in West Berlin to inquire about any information on the possible survival of any part of his collection. The Director responded and was as sceptical as Sachs was. He said that if the collection had been at the Kunstgewerbemuseum or at the Gestapo headquarters, then it was overwhelmingly likely that it had either been demolished in allied bombing or “cleared out by the First Army of Occupation.”<sup>28</sup>

A few years later, a Dr. Holscher from Munich unexpectedly contacted Sachs and implied that a portion of his collection might very well exist in East Berlin.<sup>29</sup> As a result, Sachs contacted the curator at the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German History Museum), Helmut Rademacher. In a letter from May 23rd 1966, from Sachs to Rademacher, Sachs requests the collaboration of the museum curator and hopes that they might be able to work together to “do everything that can be done in order to make the remaining collection accessible and understandable to a public interested in culture and art.”<sup>30</sup> This letter was first published in the 2013 auction catalogue for the sale of Sachs’s collection at Guernsey’s auction house in New York City. The inclusion of this letter in the catalogue proves the correspondence between Sachs and Rademacher, but it conveniently excludes any of the subsequent letters between them. The complicated and politicized events that followed this exchange may account for their omission from the Guernsey catalogue – an auction catalogue that has come to function as an important resource on Sachs and his poster collection. Perhaps this was done in order to maintain the illusion of an innocuous narrative – one that couches a bleak history into a mythologized happy ending. Sachs flew to Berlin to meet with Rademacher in the 1970s (exact dates unknown), but due to Cold War politics that divided Berlin, neither Rademacher nor Sachs were able to discuss a solution to the collection’s future in person.<sup>31</sup> At this point in the Cold War and in the aftermath of World War II, there was still “no legal channel for the restitution of art stolen in West Berlin and rediscovered in the Eastern Bloc,”<sup>32</sup> and though Sachs attempted to file a restitution claim against the GDR, it failed.<sup>33</sup> Notes from the 2012 court proceedings state that “a claim for restitution against a public museum in the

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GDR during the times of the Cold War must have seemed as a hopeless endeavour to the father; this also indicates that the father, by referring to the compensation sum received, did not express a definitive waiver of his rights to the collection...”<sup>34</sup> Sachs died in 1974 and the collection remained with the museum under the supervision of Rademacher.

Helmut Rademacher, the curator at the German History Museum, is an important and often overlooked figure in this story. Rademacher was widely known as an expert on German poster art, and he organized several exhibitions and published numerous texts that revolved around Sachs’s collection. The collection was obviously coveted by the curator and by the Museum, so it remains unclear whether certain less flattering details about the provenance of the museum’s poster collection were intentionally omitted or were merely unknown. Regardless, the museum and Rademacher proudly celebrated the provenance of their collection. In the exhibition catalogue for the 1992 exhibition called *Kunst! Kommerz! Visionen! Deutsche Plakate 1888-1933* (Art! Commerce! Visions! German Posters 1888-1933) at the museum, Rademacher notes that “an essential part of this collection was the former collection of Dr. Hans Sachs, a dentist from Berlin, sold in 1938 to emigrate from Berlin.”<sup>35</sup> This inaccurate statement legitimizes the Museum’s possession and ‘ownership’ of these posters, and it marks the beginnings of a subsequent scandal and legal battle between the German History Museum and Sachs’s son Peter.

Peter Sachs, who still lived in the United States, had worked as an airline pilot before retiring in 2005. Despite his father having said little about what happened to his poster collection after the war,<sup>36</sup> Peter decided that in his retirement he would do some investigating of his own. It didn’t take him long on the Internet to discover that the German History Museum proudly had in their holdings the “Hans Sachs Poster Collection.” Like his father, Peter sought first to find an amicable agreement with the Museum, but after being refused any type of restitution, he sought legal help from Osen LLC, an American law firm known for its success in cases dealing with restituting Nazi looted works.<sup>37</sup>

The legal proceedings were prolonged and tedious. The 2012 court proceedings note that the German government was hesitant about restituting the works in question, because of a \$50 000 reparation payment paid to Hans Sachs in 1961 by the Federal Restitution Act as compensation for the theft of his collection.<sup>38</sup> The German Culture Ministry sought council from the a newly formed government body and advisory group trained specially in restitution cases, called the Limbach Commission, in order to



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*Fig. 2. Anon., Advertising in Berlin, after 1936, from a screened reproduction of an early Agfacolor slide. Image courtesy: Hans Christian Adam from his book Berlin: Portrait of a City. Cologne et al. Taschen, 2005.*

“determine the rightful ownership.”<sup>39</sup> The museum director was fervently protective of the collection and in the midst of the proceedings said that “if the works were returned to the collector’s son, he would but ‘hawk them poster by poster’.”<sup>40</sup>

The museum’s mistrust of Peter Sachs can be largely attributed to the institution’s anxiety that if restituted, this collection would be divided and thus lose a great deal of its cultural capital. However, in the wake of the publication of documents like the 1998 Washington Principles,<sup>41</sup> the accusations by the German History Museum can be understood as both calculated and malicious. To elaborate, the Washington Principles stipulate that “if the pre-War owners of art that is found to have been confiscated by the Nazis and not subsequently restituted, or their heirs, can be identified, steps should be taken expeditiously to achieve a just and fair solution,”<sup>42</sup>. The consultation of the Limbach Commission was also a disappointment and the commissioners ‘suggested’ “that the multimillion-dollar Sachs collection should stay with the German Historical Museum, where it had been, for the most part in the archives, since the reunification of Germany.”<sup>43</sup>

Due to their refusal to co-operate, Peter sued the German Historical Museum in 2009. The case was highly publicized and after three years, it eventually made it to Germany’s highest court. In 2012, in a landslide ruling, it was determined that Hans Sachs – and subsequently his son and heir Peter Sachs – never lost ownership of the collection. In October of the

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same year, the remaining 4,344 posters were returned to Sachs seventy-four years after they were stolen from his father (a number of them had been destroyed and or lost during the war and thereafter). Peter Sachs assured the German museum, the public, and the media that “above all else [he] wanted his collection to be exhibited and kept together.”<sup>44</sup>

It is important to reflect on Dr. Hans Sachs’s intention for the collection. Sachs intended for the impressive cultural archive that he had amassed to be maintained and exhibited in a museum as his son Peter recalls in an interview: “[M]y father always wanted the posters to be seen by the public.”<sup>45</sup> Sachs had initially intended for this museum to be at his home in Berlin, and he had had an addition to his apartment built by architect Oscar Kauffmann to house and exhibit the collection.<sup>46</sup> Once the collection was restituted, for reasons that remain relatively unclear, Peter Sachs decided to ultimately sell the collection. While the financial burden of a seven-year court case is an obvious incentive for the sale, Sachs also told reporter Carol Cling, “I do not have the ability to keep or store over 4,000 posters.”<sup>47</sup> Sachs contacted Guernsey’s auction house in New York City to help with the auction and the collection was sold over the course of three sales.<sup>48</sup>

The catalogues for the sale of the “Hans Sachs Poster Collection” are impressive and contain never before published material written by Hans Sachs. The previously cited essay by Sachs called “The World’s Largest Poster Collection 1896-1938: How it came about and...disappeared from the Face of the Earth” from 1957, along with the letter from Sachs to Rademacher, were published for the first time in this catalogue. In the introduction of Guernsey’s catalogue (Day 1), the auction house gushes over how pleased they are that Sachs selected them: “[I]t has been a distinct honour to have been selected to represent this most important, and quite wonderful assemblage of posters constituting the Hans Sachs Collection.”<sup>49</sup> The intensive research and translation that went into the production of these catalogues is impressive, albeit curious. This document conveniently excludes all details of the lengthy legal battle, and it entirely omits the tension and conflict between Sachs (both Hans and Peter) and the German History Museum. The translation of both Hans Sachs’s essay and his letter to Rademacher is remarkably shoddy and both are riddled with spelling mistakes. If these mistakes were included in order to stay synchronized with any typos in the original document, the editors (presumably Guernsey’s, but it is not specified) fail to mention this.

Helmutt Rademacher produced a handful of exhibitions utilizing Sachs’s poster collection at the German History museum before the

collection was restituted in October 2012. His curation was thematic, and (as far as I can tell) never exhibited the collection as a whole. The sale of the collection however, prompted three unprecedented exhibitions of the Sachs collection. The first ‘exhibition’ was a two-day preview that took place in New York City in January of 2013, the second is the beautifully produced auction catalogues, and finally, the last and the most accessible exhibition can be seen at [LiveAuctioneers.com](http://LiveAuctioneers.com).

The two-day preview for the sale took place at the Bohemian National Hall in New York. This preview contained every poster that was for sale, and exhibited them in plastic sleeves haphazardly cluttered on the walls of a small room (Fig. 3). This preview is fascinating, as while it achieves Sachs’s dream to exhibit the collection as a whole and to a public, it simultaneously marks the beginning of the collection’s deconstruction and dispersion. By the end of the three sales, The Hans Sachs poster collection ceased to exist.

In addition to the temporary exhibition at the Bohemian Hall and the impressive but expensive auction catalogues, there is one last place where the Sachs collection still exists.<sup>50</sup> [LiveAuctioneers.com](http://LiveAuctioneers.com) is an incredibly helpful resource where the contents of the three sales can still (as of December 2014) be found. Each lot, in addition to a high-quality image, has the following information: the dimensions, the artist, the year of production, the reserve price, and the final price that it was sold for. The distribution, purchase, and subsequent re-collection by various buyers and institutions completely disassemble the collection, and [LiveAuctioneers.com](http://LiveAuctioneers.com) quite literally functions as an archive. Several museums (including the German History Museum) purchased posters during these sales, but the bulk of the collection has been redistributed across the world. The online preview and the preview at the Bohemian Hall in New York became the most viewed (and certainly the most accessible) exhibitions of Sachs’s collection.

The shift in knowledge production and access to historical information has been rearranged in the case of Sachs’s poster collection. A collection that was intended to be held in a public institution was subject to a tedious and drawn-out legal battle that resulted in the sale of the restituted works. While it is indeed unfair to speak on behalf of anyone in this case, it is important to acknowledge the conflation of economy and education. The invention of the auction house as a pseudo-academy, for example, involved in the publication and dissemination of important information in the auction catalogues, is a precarious and slippery one that places research motivation and intention along side speculated monetary gain. The research presented in this paper has attempted to highlight how the

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exhibition space has morphed throughout history, and how the valuation of the Sachs poster collection has been transformed at every exhibition or lack thereof. The Hans Sachs poster collection is a remarkable case study. It addresses a history of violence and of a convoluted legal climate that has become synonymous with art restitution cases. This case has also complicated and teased out notions of what constitutes a collection – form, value, size – and how these valuations have shifted over time. How has this collection been historically evaluated? How have these values change throughout time? What purpose does a collection have? How does it function as a whole and how can it function in separate parts? This research has not uncovered a logical or fair solution to the issues at hand, nor has it invented new or better ways of dealing with arduous restitution cases, but it has enabled better questions to be asked and it has proved that cases like Sachs’s need to be made accessible and public in order to begin considering such questions.

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