

Trove of Nazi-looted art spurs heirs to become detectives

Cornelius Gurlitt, the son of a Nazi art dealer, is now at the center of an international scandal over looted art.

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Two years ago, an elderly man approached a German auction house with a masterpiece: Max Beckmann's "The Lion Tamer."

When the auction house – Lempertz, located in Cologne – published details of the sale, German art attorney Markus Stoetzel immediately realized the painting's origin.

He knew the Nazis had stolen it from the collection of a prominent Jewish art dealer, Alfred Flechtheim.

Stoetzel contacted the auction house and negotiated a settlement with the elderly man, a routine resolution when a seller and auction house realize a piece of art was acquired by the Nazis.

"I tried to get into a conversation with this guy" about the artwork, Stoetzel recalled. But he "was not interested to talk."

Today, it appears obvious why. The elderly man was Cornelius Gurlitt, the son of a Nazi art dealer who is now at the center of an international scandal over looted art.

In early 2012, Gurlitt was found in possession of 1,406 other masterpieces – from Picasso to Chagall – neatly stored in a Munich apartment.

The discovery was only made public more than a year later, when German news magazine Focus published details two weeks ago.

The German government has still not released a full accounting of the art.

For families whose artwork was stolen by the Nazis, the delay has been agonizing. In the absence of official information, heirs to victims have become detectives, hypothesizing whether their property – for many, priceless family heirlooms – is in the trove.

Digging through archives, several families have come to a sobering conclusion: The Gurlitt name had been on their radar for years as the potential possessor of their stolen art.

In the case of “The Lion Tamer,” declassified US military reports reveal that the painting was with the Gurlitt family for nearly 70 years, according to documents released by the Commission for Looted Art in Europe. In 1945, American soldiers arrested Cornelius Gurlitt’s father, Hildebrand, on suspicion of being a Nazi dealer. In fact, Joseph Goebbels had tasked Hildebrand Gurlitt with just that job.

At the time, a small collection of his art was seized. One such painting, coded in bureaucratic parlance as simply “2004/12,” was “The Lion Tamer.”

The painting did not stay in Allied custody for long. In 1950, Gurlitt managed to convince the Allies that he was not connected to the Nazis, and he was able to recover 117 paintings, 19 drawings and 72 “decorative objects.”

At the time, he told the soldiers that the rest of his art collection was destroyed in the Allied firebombing of Dresden. After his death, in 1956, Gurlitt’s widow told the German government that all of the family’s art was destroyed.

Few in the art world suspected that the Gurlitt art trove still existed when Cornelius Gurlitt approached the Lempertz auction house in late 2011 with the Beckmann masterpiece.

Stoetzel spotted the auction of “The Lion Tamer” and immediately contacted the auction house.

The auction house did not proactively contact the Flechtheim heirs or Stoetzel.

But Karl-Sax Feddersen, a legal adviser to the auction house, said Lempertz was investigating the case at the time.

“We had done our research with regard to the Beckmann and were discussing whether or not it was a possible restitution case – the documentation does allow ambiguous positions – when the Flechtheim estate contacted us,” he wrote in an email on Saturday.

When confronted with the claim, Gurlitt agreed to a settlement – the profit from the \$1.2 million sale would be split with the auction house and the Flechtheim family.

While auction houses will inform sellers that a piece of art is suspected to be stolen, Gurlitt was not obligated to settle the case. According to Wesley Fisher, director of research for the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, he could have simply walked away.

“Very commonly, an auction house, upon finding out that an item was suspected of being plundered [by the Nazis, will] inform the seller of this and suggest that some sort of settlement be worked out, and the like.

But the seller can then say, ‘I don’t want to sell it,’” Fisher said. “There is no obligation on the part of the auction house to inform the original owners, so you have a problem.”

That Gurlitt was not required to settle leaves Flechtheim’s family’s attorneys to speculate about why he did.

“Now, looking back, we see what his goal was here,” said Stoetzel’s colleague, New York-based attorney Mel Urbach. “He has... other paintings to worry about at the time and said, ‘Well, these guys are here, they may cause trouble, they may blow my cover,’” he said, hypothesizing about Gurlitt’s reasons for settling.

Today, the Flechtheim family faces a tantalizing prospect: If Gurlitt tried to sell one of the family’s paintings, it is possible he has more.

The attorneys have reached out to the prosecutor’s office in Augsburg, which is handling the criminal case, and received no response.

The spokesman for the prosecutor, Matthias Nickolai, said he could not disclose how many claims regarding the Gurlitt-held art his office has received.

He wrote in an email that “lots of requests arrived...Understandably, details cannot be advised.”

Martha Hinrichsen, 65, is in a similar position to the Flechtheim family – she knows that Gurlitt had one of her family’s paintings, but can’t be sure if he has others.

And the Gurlitt name is familiar.

German authorities announced they had found Carl Spitzweg’s drawing “Pair Making Music” in the Gurlitt stash. The piece had been stolen from Hinrichsen’s grandfather.

“I’m astounded,” said Hinrichsen, who lives in Connecticut.

But the Gurlitt name was not surprising. The family knew in 1971 that Gurlitt had gotten his hands on some of their property.

At the time, Hinrichsen’s father hired a German attorney to investigate the fate of the artwork. In a typewritten letter, the investigator listed four paintings – including the Spitzweg – that “cannot be traced any more.”

“All of these were sold to the art dealer, Gurlitt, in Hamburg. Their further destiny is not traceable,” wrote the attorney.

This letter is one piece of paper amid 15 file boxes worth of documents about her family’s art collection, which Hinrichsen said she has now unearthed. She is going page by page to uncover the ownership histories of her family’s missing artwork.

When it comes to restitution, she said, “it’s a hard issue.”

“Here are innocent people who were dehumanized, and here is their artwork,” she said. “It’s just an amazing discovery.”

Link: <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Trove-of-Nazi-looted-art-spurs-heirs-to-become-detectives-332075>