

From the Collection of an Outlaw

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The Prussian Heritage Foundation comes to an agreement with the heirs of the art historian Curt Glaser. In 1933 the director of the Berlin Art Library was chased away and had to let go parts of his art collection.

By Stefan Koldehoff

Michael Eisenhauer, Director General of the State Museums in Berlin, reached the conclusion already in 2008: "The case is clear: The auction of his library, his furniture and parts of his art collection served to finance his and his wife's escape." Nevertheless, it took almost four years until concrete consequences were drawn from this conclusion. Now the Prussian Heritage Foundation has reached an agreement with the heirs of the Berlin physician, art historian and collector Curt Glaser according to which four works of art will be restituted to the family and five further works of art will remain in the Berlin museums, "not least to honour the memory of the former director and important art historian Prof. Dr. Curt Glaser," as the agreement states.

The Berlin Collection of Prints and Drawings will hand over to the heirs three precious works by Edvard Munch, "Young Women on the Beach", "Old Man's Prayer" and "Death and Woman," as well as the wood-cut "Conversation among Farmers" by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Five other works by Munch and Kirchner will remain in Berlin. Both sides call it a "fair and just solution" as required by the Washington Declaration on Looted Art of 1998.

Glaser defended the Expressionists

Curt Glaser did not hide his desolate situation: "I had to give up my apartment, I lost my job", he wrote to his friend, the painter Edvard Munch, on May 19, 1933. "I do not believe that it would make sense to rent another large apartment at this point in time. Therefore I have freed myself from all my possessions in order to start completely afresh at some point." Immediately following their rise to power, the Nazis had suspended Glaser, the director of the Berlin Art Library aged 53 at the time, and expelled him from his official residence. He had converted to Protestantism in 1911, but nevertheless was considered by the new rulers as a Jew who had fought for expressionism, defamed as "systemic art" by the Nazis.

Glaser, whose first wife had died half a year before, realized that he was facing ruin: "All of us who do not stand on what is called the 'national' ground are outlaws now", Harry Graf Kessler noted in his diary at the time. Glaser decided to emigrate. He knew that he could not take along large parts of his library, his furniture and his art

collection. Furthermore, escaping to safety abroad cost money. As “non-aryian” employee who had been terminated and suspended Glaser received a low pension in the beginning, but this money was paid to a blocked account. He therefore decided to organize an auction.

A Life's Work at Auction

Approximately 4.660 books from Glaser's private art collection, the complete furniture of his living room, bedroom, dressing room and dining room at Prinz-Albrecht-Straße were auctioned off by “Internationales Kunst- und Auktionshaus GmbH” in Berlin on May 9, 1933, one day before the book-burnings. Munch's painting “Dancing Summer Night”, today in a Norwegian private collection, featured in the catalogue between porcelains and side-tables. Ten days later the Berlin auction house Max Perl Bücher sold off drawings, sculptures, Japanese wood-cuts, arts and crafts and – as the catalogue says – “paintings and prints from the 16th to the 20th century, including a Munch collection.” The Berlin Cabinet of Drawings and Prints purchased six works by Munch at one of the auctions. Five works by Kirchner, of which three still exist today, were donated to the Cabinet shortly afterwards by an unknown donor. Glaser emigrated with his second wife, who was also Jewish, via France to Switzerland, Italy and in 1941 to Cuba and the United States. Professionally, he was never able to continue the career he had started in Germany. He died in November 1943 in Lake Placid, New York.

Glaser's Distress was Acknowledged

With the restitution to his heirs the Prussian Heritage Foundation officially acknowledges Glaser's distress. Berlin is not the first city to do so. Already in 2007 the city of Hannover decided to return the painting “Roman Countryside” by Lovis Corinth which had been sold in the first Glaser auction. And in 2010 the Dutch government restituted a “Winter Landscape” by Willem van de Velded.J. On the other hand, the cities of London and Basel still refuse to restitute works from the Glaser collection. The Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg has not been willing to restitute either, although research in its archives revealed correspondence from the year 1933 which show that even the players at the time considered the prices paid at the auction to be “dirt cheap.”

Finally, a solution for Munch's painting “Music on Karl-Johann-Street” at Kunsthaus Zürich has yet to be found as well: In December 1940 Glaser had to offer the famous painting to the museum in order to pay for his trip to Cuba. The price was 15.000 Swiss francs, deemed at the time, as the museum's files reveal, to represent “half of today's market value”