Auction logs from the Nazi period

Where does the realm of discretion end, where does the realm of lying start?

A sensational handling of Looted Art: The Neumeister auction house finds auction logs from the Nazi period. The auction house will make them available for systematic research

By Julia Voss

Anyone who has ever entered an auction house, be it small or large, be it in Munich, Cologne, Berlin, London or Paris, will recognize the tense silence which seems to emanate from the displayed objects, the paintings, carpets or furniture that was assembled in order to change its owner. Each object bears a number, each has an estimated value, each is listed in a catalogue. They seem to wait for the auction – the bidders, the offers, the knock of the gavel. This is the glamorous facade which you can see. But behind this is a world full of mystery: The identity of the seller and buyer usually is a well-kept secret of the auctioning world.

It works like a novel where only one character knows the entire story. In literature this character is called the auctorial narrator. In an auction house this person is the managing director: He does not only know the objects, he knows the sellers, the buyers, their names and their stories. Discretion is his business. “Discretion” is a beautiful word which sounds like a virtue, like someone you can trust, someone who keeps confidential information confidential and does not peddle his knowledge. But there is one problem with discretion: Circumstances may exist which turn it into lying. What are these? Katrin Stoll, managing director and owner of the auction house Neumeister, was faced with just this question a few weeks ago. It was Monday, March 18, when an employee approached her to tell her about a find of which he did not know what it was.

“I had a skeleton in the closet”

Neumeister is an auction house in Munich, it is in walking distance from the great art museums, the Pinakotheks; each year about ten to twenty thousand objects circulate through the house; the main building alone has three freight elevators. There are also numerous storage spaces. In the basement there is a room which so far had only been of interest to the janitor: the room for house equipment with a control desk, colourful switches and an unimpressive little steel cupboard. The employee had op-
ened this little cupboard. What he found were 44 annotated auction catalogues dating from 1936 to 1944. “Annotated” means that they include hand-written notes. And this means: Here one can read what was not talked about in the post-war years. Object by object it is possible to see who delivered the object to be auctioned, to whom it belonged, who bought it and how much the buyer paid. The cultivated hand-writing of the times says, for example: “Gestapo” – or “Gotthilf”, the name of a Jewish architect from Vienna. In short, the little cupboard held the provenance of works of art that are considered Looted Art today.

Would it be discretion or lying not to tell this story? To lock the little cupboard again? Who would know about it? The answer to the last question is: nobody. The answer to the first question is given by Katrin Stoll herself: “I had a skeleton in the closet”, she says, “I wanted this skeleton to see the light of day.” Katrin Stoll was not completely unprepared: She has been managing director of Neumeister since 2008 and the company had belonged to her family before. Stoll’s father, Rudolf Neumeister, had taken it over in 1958; the previous owner was called Adolf Weinmüller. There is no photography of Weinmüller, who died in 1958; no historian knows what he looked like, but there are figures. In the years between 1936 and 1945 Weinmüller dealt with approximately 34,500 objects in his main office in Munich and the subsidiary in Vienna which he opened later. 33 auctions took place in Munich, 18 in Vienna.

**History must be revisited**

Weinmüller was closely connected to the Reich Chamber for the Arts, to the agencies and institutions of the Office for Foreign Exchange, the Chambers for Industry and Commerce and numerous art dealers. In short: Weinmüller was a central figure of the art trade during the Nazi period. He, who had been at the helm of a modest company before 1933, rose to be market leader after he had assisted in the liquidation of all Jewish art dealerships. Weinmüller profited twice from the persecution of Jews: First his competitors were crushed. Then he auctioned off the objects Jewish citizens had to sell or leave behind, later the objects that had been stolen. After World War II he was completely rehabilitated. Nobody knows whether he himself considered his testimony before the denazification authority to be “discretion” or “lying”. It clearly was lying; under a legal perspective, the lies have become time-barred. He could not remember his customers, Weinberger had claimed; and that there were no documents from the war period. Lost due to the war.

What now? History will have to be revisited. The auction logs that were found disclose the names of those who purchased looted goods. A few objects sold by Weinmüller’s auction house have been restituted already: for instance, in 2007 Friedrich von Amerling’s “Girl with a Straw Head” which had until then been in the possession of the Vienna Belvedere. In 2012 a painting by Waldmüller followed, a loan to the Oldenburg State Museum. Both paintings had originally belonged to Ernst Gotthilf, the Jewish architect in Vienna who had to flee Nazi persecution and died in
exile in 1950. The name of his collection is mentioned sixty-six times in the auction logs. The buyers? Private individuals, but also museums.

**Other auction houses stick to sullen silence**

Last year already, the well-researched book “Dealing with art during the Nazi period: Adolf Weinmüller in Munich and Vienna” was published. It was written by the art historian Meike Hopp of the Munich Central Institute for Art History. Katrin Stoll had commissioned her to research this history. Now Meike Hopp will be charged with the evaluation and publication of the reappeared auction catalogues.

This is a sensation as far as the handling of Looted Art is concerned: It is the first time that an auction house makes available auction logs from the Nazi period for research. Other German auction houses stick to sullen silence when this subject is raised. There is no legal obligation. Only a moral obligation. Discretion may be a virtue, but so is responsibility, and awareness of history. Discretion continues to be Katrin Stoll’s daily business which she takes very seriously. But she does not want to lie.

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