THE ART OF WAR

The Nazis plundered priceless masterpieces and jewellery to adorn their palaces and the necks of their women. Sixty years on, descendants and detectives are still tracking down the treasured heirlooms.

By HANNAH ROTHSCHILD
Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I (1907) by Gustav Klimt.

Opposite: An American soldier standing among piles of Nazi loot stored in a church in Ellingen, Germany.
Early next year, the perennially talented, temporarily mustachioed George Clooney will burst into cinemas as the star, co-writer and director of a film called The Monuments Men. Based on a book by Robert Edsel, it tells the true story of a group of about 345 mainly middle-aged men and women, historians and museum curators who managed, between 1945 and 1951, to identify and return more than five million cultural objects stolen by the Nazis. It was a remarkable feat of daring and perseverance. Speaking from his cutting room on Lake Como, Clooney tells me that he chose this story mainly because it was one of those great old-fashioned war films, with the good guys versus the ultimate baddie, Hitler. Clooney’s movie is bound to be a cracker, but I know from my family’s personal experience, as well as others’, that the story of Nazi plunder is far from over.

There are still many thousands of pieces of Nazi-looted art in circulation, worth well over $10 billion. Officially, there are 2,000 unclaimed works in France, many in major museums such as the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay. Unofficially, the number is thought to be higher; Hector Feliciano, author of The Lost Museum, suggests that the real figure is over 15,000. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem holds some 1,200 pieces of art identified as having been seized from Jews by the Nazis; a tiny proportion has been restituted. Russia holds by far the largest cache of Nazi-looted art, confiscated in 1945 as ‘reparation’ payment.

Astonishingly, contemporary versions of the Monuments Men and Women are still working to right the wrongs of history. From London’s Hatton Garden, a district famous for its diamond dealers, Chris Marinello runs the Art Loss Register, an organisation that operates a permanent international database of stolen and missing works of art, antiques and valuables. The Monuments Men did incredible work, but it was a drop in the bucket, he says. ‘We are still picking up the pieces of the war.’ Across town, behind a nondescript door in a terraced street in Marylebone, a stone’s throw from Sherlock Holmes’ eyrie in Baker Street, lurks another unlikely detective. The elegant Anne Webber is unlike her cosy fictional counterparts Miss Marple or Precious Ramotswe, or the tough, laconic DSI Stella Gibson or DCI Jane Tennison. But then, Webber’s specialty is highly unusual; she has spent the past 15 years tracking down art and artefacts stolen by the Nazis and reuniting these works with their rightful owners. Since its inception in 1999, her organisation, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, has successfully located and returned more than 3,000 stolen items, including heirlooms of little material but significant emotional value. On one occasion, Webber managed to identify the original owner of three printed books from a handwritten name inscribed on the flyleaf. Tragically, the whole family had perished in a death camp, save for one child who had been hidden by a Catholic family. Over 50 years later, Webber found the same child, now a grandmother, who saw for the first time her mother’s handwriting on the flyleaf of those books.

Some time ago, I decided to work a story about a Nazi-looted picture into a novel. For me, it wasn’t so much about goodies and baddies as it was a metaphor about relative values and how we navigate around our past. I set about researching different stories to use; the true incidents turned out to be stranger and more captivating than fiction. I had no idea how complicated and emotional my research would become. Each incident was strewn with disparate characters, debatable facts and unknowable truths, all wrapped up in a quagmire of financial and moral issues. I soon found that there were no casual observers or disinterested parties; each case is booby-trapped with high emotion. There is still intense emotional fragility, anger and hurt around the victims of the Holocaust and their descendants. On the other side, there are also individuals, institutions and governments using many venal means to protect or procure unclaimed treasures; some ‘interested’ parties will stop at nothing to protect their assets. Fortunes have been lost and made from Nazi-looted art. Some of the people I interviewed refused to use their real name in case of neo-Nazi reprisals. Often, I wanted to step away from this story, investigate something easier, less convoluted; the problem was, I was hooked.

My first step was to try to make sense of the bigger picture – to understand what actually happened. I learned that between 1939 and 1944 the Nazis confiscated and stole (or, in some cases, bought at knock-down prices) tens of thousands of works of art from European Jews or other ‘undesirables’ and political opponents. Some estimate that they stole more than 20 per cent of all the art ever made in Europe. The Nazis had two major objectives. The first was to plunder the continent’s finest cultural artefacts. The best were siphoned off for Hitler’s pet project: a purpose-built pre-eminent art museum in Linz. After the Führer had his pick, the avaricious Hermann Göring was second in line. The rest was distributed among high-ranking officials or stored for after the war.

The Nazis’ second intention was the complete annihilation of the cultural and personal heritage of non-Aryan races through the destruction of their identity, folklore, artefacts, literature, architecture and language. ‘It was part of the Final Solution. They set out to eradicate a cultural heritage,’ David Glasser of the Ben Uri museum reflects. The Nazis kept meticulous records of their plunder – no item was too insignificant: Botticelli and bed linen; Cézanne and cutlery; books, shoes, statues, church bells, jewellery, children’s toys; anything to destroy the tendrils of memory and belonging. The Nazis stole the wealth from the rich and the poverty from the poor.

In the chaotic scramble that followed the war, with around six million Jews dead and Europe in disarray, it was often impossible to match painting to proprietor. Few had time to write a will; most were concerned with trying to survive. When an owner could not
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be found, the allies or Monuments Men sent the works to their countries’ museums.

Following the war, survivors put their energies into rebuilding a life, rather than tracking down lost works of art. Many wanted a complete break from the past, to start again, often in a different country. Few could afford, let alone face, a long legal battle with the authorities. Some had sold their artefacts to the Nazis, either through forced sales or as a means of escape, and assumed they had no claim. Many could never speak about their experiences. It took a friend’s aunt 70 years to explain to her children how and why she had a tattooed number on her arm. ‘I never had the words,’ she says, ‘I didn’t want to contaminate them with my experience.’

Often it takes the next generation to have the energy, distance and determination to search out their relations’ goods and chattels. ‘In a strange way, we are better equipped today to identify and return to the victims of the Nazis many of their stolen objects than the Monuments Men were in 1945,’ Edsel explained via email. ‘The internet – the world’s greatest bulletin board – enables people looking for their belongings to seek help. Databases all over the world can be scoured with the press of a button.’ In the past few years, wartime auction catalogues, Nazi records and other relevant documents have been digitised and placed on the web for all to access. Websites such as the Getty Research Institute, the Art Loss Register and Lootedart.com provide fascinating databases, accessible to all. Viewed together, they gather and show the latest international news on restitution and enable cross-referencing from a multitude of online resources. Computer programs have picture-recognition modes; details can be crosschecked across languages and borders.

There are heir-hunters and legal practices that operate solely to unite relatives with missing objects, some hoping to land a lucrative commission. Much of the art market operates in a transparent, legitimate way, but a significant percentage of its £40 billion annual turnover still takes place off the record and behind closed doors. Thanks to the actions of the new Monuments Men and Women, it is harder to buy and sell works with uncertain and broken histories of ownership, though many still overlook suspicious provenances.

Webber and her ilk travel frequently, advising governments and other bodies about restitution. In 1998, at a conference in Washington, 44 governments endorsed certain principles for dealing with Nazi-looted art; it’s impossible to enforce a legally binding international agreement. Many choose to ignore international guidelines. In June this year, a serious (and ongoing) diplomatic incident occurred when the German Chancellor Angela Merkel challenged President Putin to return works of art stolen from Germany by the Russians following World War II. Hardly a week goes past without news of a successful or thwarted attempt to have an heirloom returned; some are priceless, some simply personal, but all represent a lost heritage and a vital link to a violently severed past.

Certain works of art are spectacularly valuable; owners, putative or actual, stand to lose or gain enormous sums. The late Jewish refugee Maria Altmann fought a notorious case. In 1907 and 1912, her uncle Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer commissioned Gustav Klimt...
to paint his wife Adele. The Nazis confiscated these works, along with Ferdinand’s sugar refinery, homes, large porcelain collection and jewels, in 1938. The diamond necklace worn by Adele in Klimt’s portrait ended up around the neck of Göring’s wife.

The Austrian government argued that Adele wanted the paintings housed in a national museum. Altmann demurred strongly. ‘My uncle would never have donated anything to Austria after the way he had been treated,’ she said. Altmann spent many years in pursuit of justice. ‘They will delay, delay, delay, hoping I will die,’ she said in 2001, at the age of 84. ‘But I will do them the pleasure of staying alive.’ Eventually Altmann won her case and offered all the pictures back to the Austrian government for about $150 million. The Austrians balked. In 2006, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I became, at that time, the most expensive painting ever sold, bought by Ronald Lauder for his Neue Galerie for $135 million. Altmann sold her other paintings to private collectors for $192 million.

No family has shown as much determination as the descendants of Paul Rosenberg, the French dealer, collector and friend of artists. Picasso called him ‘Rosi’; he called the painter ‘Pic’. During his lifetime, Rosenberg collected more than 400 contemporary masterpieces. The family managed (narrowly) to escape the German advance in 1940; their paintings were confiscated. By an extraordinary coincidence, Paul’s son Alexandre managed to recover a number of paintings when, in August 1944, he arrested some German soldiers guarding the contents of a train. Ripping open the boxes, Alexandre saw works by Picasso, Renoir, Bouché and Cézanne that belonged to his father. Since then, three generations of the same family have been engaged in a long struggle to reassemble the collection. Showing extraordinary tenacity; they have fought museums and governments through courts, and on occasion have been prepared to buy work back. ‘We are not willing to forget or let it go,’ says Marianne Rosenberg, Paul’s granddaughter, a New York-based lawyer. ‘I think of it as a bit of a crusade.’ At the moment, their efforts are focused on Matisse’s Woman in Blue in Front of Fireplace, currently residing in the Henie Onstad Art Centre in Norway.

Christopher Marinello, the London-based detective who runs the Art Loss Register, is managing the Rosenbergs’ claim, which the museum is refuting because of a small break in the painting’s provenance. ‘I am insulted by those who say that [the heirs] are cashing in. It is their right to do whatever they want to do with it,’ says Marinello.

From the outset, the Nazi Party used my family, the Rothschilds, as the model for the apotheosis of evil Judaism. Their enmity did not stretch to the family’s goods and chattels, and they confiscated more than 5,000 works just from the French branch, including masterpieces by Rembrandt, Velázquez, Rubens and Titian, as well as millions of books, manuscripts, Judaica and other precious objects. By February 1941, the Nazis rounded up 42 crates of Rothschild artefacts: H1 to H19 were to go to Hitler; G1 to G23, to Göring. Hitler’s haul included Vermeer’s The Astronomer and Boucher’s Madame de Pompadour. Göring had to make do with works by Cranach, Fragonard and others.

Thanks mainly to meticulous cataloguing by the Nazis’ Paris-based ERR looting organisation, the French Rothschilds had many works returned. But it took an Austrian cousin, Bettina Looram, 60 years to retrieve her heirlooms. Recently, a Dutch Old Master turned up in a Swiss bank vault belonging to the Nazi art expert Bruno Lohse. Even with a cast-iron provenance, the authorities have yet to hand it back. In another case, the family came up with an ingenious ploy to recover looted papers: in 1945, the Russians had confiscated documents stolen by the Germans that related to the Rothschilds’ early history. Over several years, the cousins bought thousands of love letters written by Tsar Alexander II to his mistress. Surely the Kremlin would prefer these to some dusty old bank ledgers? The swap was made in 2001.

One tactic that museum directors and politicians use to justify withholding heirlooms is to claim that important art ‘belongs’ in the public domain. ‘The average citizen does not care where these items are displayed – in Berlin, St Petersburg, Moscow or Turkey,’ Putin told Merkel. Although the Dutch Restitutions Committee accepted that the Jewish industrialist Richard Semmel had been forced under duress to sell his art in 1933, it ruled against restitution on the grounds that his heirs ‘carried less weight’ than a public museum.

The stratospheric prices that place art out of the financial reach of museums and nations are obfuscating some underlying moral issues: are the heirs motivated by money? In some cases, they didn’t know, or even know of, these forebears. A lucrative industry has sprung up around ‘heir-hunters’ – those who track down relatives and offer, for a percentage, to reunite them with lost works of art. In an attempt to separate material from emotional value, to understand how objects provide a link with the past and a means to connect with long-lost relatives and extinguished customs, I asked Webber and Glasser to put me in touch with those who had put as much effort into recovering works of no or little monetary value.

Anthony Gilbert was brought up in north London. I thought of myself as English, even though my mother was a bit funny and foreign,’ he tells me on the telephone. ‘As far as I knew, she was Catholic from a normal middle-European background.’ When his mother was in her eighties, a letter arrived out of the blue from an organisation helping with restitution, asking if she was related to a certain Austrian family; if so, she had a claim to a painting looted by the Nazis. Intrigued, Anthony started to investigate his mother’s family on Ancestry.com, and found to his astonishment that they were Jewish, descended from a 14th-century Polish rabbinical line. The family had converted to Catholicism in 1919, and when Anthony’s mother was born in 1926, her family decided not to burden their youngest child with knowledge of her inheritance. Nevertheless,
the family’s conversion did not save them from the Nazis; Anthony found out that his grandfather was taken away, never to reappear. His great-grandparents were forced to sell or leave their possessions in August 1939 when they fled to Britain, where they spent the rest of their lives in exile.

Later, Anthony found a packet of black and white photographs that had belonged to his mother’s family in an old box. Tinged with age, they showed the family’s Vienna apartment in the mid-1930s. ‘There were no people in the photographs,’ Anthony explains. ‘They were taken before they left.’ The photographs were eerie reminders of a life eradicated, time capsules of a former world. These photographs also provided vital clues and proof about missing works of art. With Webber’s help, the family was able to trace, identify and reclaim some of the paintings visible in the old photographs. Each time one is recovered, Anthony electronically colours in a black and white image.

‘My great-grandparents were marked out as Jews and forced to sell things that should have stayed in our family and then descended through the generations,’ he tells me. ‘I feel an obligation to do as they wanted. This is not about money; this is a moral issue and there is a moral compass.’

Born in 1922, Paul Caspari carries his age and childhood trauma lightly. The remarkably youthful 90-year-old man remembers the ‘magnificent’ Munich gallery that his father started and his mother took over. Paul and his brother had been raised as Lutheran Protestants, but there were Jewish antecedents on both sides of the family. For a time after the Nazis came to power, life continued as normal; but sensing trouble, Frau Caspari sent her sons to a British boarding school. One day, letters from Mama suddenly stopped. Later, Paul discovered that she had been deported and murdered in a Lithuanian ghetto. A bank, claiming it was liquidising a loan, had repossessed some 50 or 60 paintings, including works by Titian and a Cézanne, in 1935; and more than 100 valuable books in 1939. ‘I won’t give up,’ he says. ‘It won’t change my lifestyle one iota, but why the hell should other people have it? It’s not just about the money, it’s about people who lost their lives.’

Andrew Gower, an accountant by trade, found out that his great-great-uncle Max was Viennese and fought against the Germans in World War I. Max founded a banana-importing business, made a fortune and spent every last penny on creating an art collection. The Nazis chased him out of Austria in 1938 and appropriated the paintings. Max’s heirs – his nephew Henry and niece Esther, Andrew’s grandmother – were sent during the war on the Kindertransport to England, where their names were Anglicised. It is only lately that Andrew has realised that his grandmother and great-uncle were ‘so damaged, so hurt by all they had seen, before the days of counselling, that they couldn’t deal with it. They met it with silence. It wasn’t denial; they just weren’t able to talk about it’.

Andrew’s great-uncle Henry was a very private man who never married and lived with his sister. After his death, the family discovered some boxes of papers containing detailed inventories and photographs. Finally, Uncle Henry’s lifelong obsession was revealed; he had devoted his whole life, unsuccessfully, to trying to recover his uncle Max’s looted art. Andrew admits now that reuniting his family’s collection ‘is a bit of a crusade. I feel a massive responsibility to right the wrongs’.

So far, Andrew and his brother have got about four per cent of the paintings back. They have not sold anything, but Andrew admits that if something really valuable turned up, he might sell it and put his children into private school. ‘I get thoroughly pissed off if anyone suggests that [these pictures] aren’t my brother’s or mine. If someone buys a painting in good faith, it’s theirs to do what they want with it. Even if I get 499 pieces back and there is still one missing, I will go after it. It should never have happened. This stuff should never have been stolen.’

Anne knew that her great-aunt Gustie had married an Austrian artist called Jehudo Epstein. Her mother inherited four ‘rather dark and gloomy pictures’. ‘We didn’t know a lot about art. The pictures just came to us when my mum died,’ Anne tells me. One day, out of the blue, she received a phone call from a company of heir-hunters (who, for legal reasons, can’t be named). Anne was astonished to hear that she and her sister were the surviving beneficiaries of Epstein’s estate. ‘They learned that Epstein had left Austria for South Africa in 1935, leaving his studio of 172 paintings with a Jewish friend. When the Nazis arrived in Vienna, the friend’s possessions, including the Epsteins, were confiscated. With time, these were dispersed by dealers and auction houses and are now scattered all over the world.’

Over 60 years later, a Viennese university museum, realising that it was holding looted art, advertised for any known descendants to step forward and reclaim a painting. The firm of heir-hunters, which has stringers placed in different countries, spotted the ad and managed to trace Anne to England, where it offered to represent her claim in return for 33 per cent of the value. ‘I did some research and saw that it was a genuine company,’ Anne says. ‘Then we were contacted by a couple of other people, too – for 60 years you hear nothing, then suddenly everyone’s on it. We started with nothing, so if we end up with £100 each it’s a bonus.’

Anne signed the contract with the original heir-hunters, but soon realised the implications. ‘Even if we weren’t selling the paintings, they would be entitled to a cash payment of 33 per cent of the pictures’ value,’ she explains, ‘and a third of all future claims as well.’ The paintings were valued conservatively between £250 and £1,200; Anne didn’t have that kind of money. Luckily, the sisters were able to extricate themselves from the contract.

Since then, Anne and her sister have received some, but by no means all, of Epstein’s estate. They are in the process of researching 14 more paintings in Austria, but establishing the provenance and ownership is a lengthy and laborious business.

‘I have really learned a hard lesson or two,’ Anne admits. ‘I have...
learned to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut.

Thomas Goldschmidt’s grandfather was a proud German who fought for his country in World War I and spent most of his fortune creating a library of more than 1,200 volumes dedicated to his literary heroes, Goethe and Schiller. Goldschmidt was also a Jew, and when the National Socialists came to power he was forced to sell his books to find money to escape. The family got to Bolivia, where Thomas’ father, a highly educated surgeon fluent in six languages, found work as a driver.

‘I didn’t know about the collection,’ Thomas admits. ‘It was in Weimar, East Germany, and impossible to even look at.’ Anne Webber traced the family from Berlin to Bolivia and back, and contacted him out of the blue. Thomas Goldschmidt is not a wealthy man, but for him, reclaiming his grandfather’s library was not ‘about money. My grandfather wanted this collection to be in Weimar’. Goldschmidt accepted a small remuneration in return for allowing the library to retain the collection, and its future is safe and secure in Weimar.

‘That is what my grandfather wanted,’ he says. ‘It helps my heart that we fulfilled a little bit of history.’

I hadn’t realised the extent to which family folklore and inheritance help me negotiate the present.

Before hearing their stories, I took for granted the gift of a relatively unbroken lineage, not to mention the pleasure and comfort of possessions and stories passing freely from generation to generation. I hadn’t realised the extent to which family folklore, mementoes, photographs and inheritance help me to negotiate the present and how dependent I am on the delicate network of custom in many aspects of everyday life. There are objects of value and sentimentality that remind me of loved ones and evoke significant memories: a chipped golden teapot belonging to one grandmother; a set of china once owned by another; a beautiful drawing; a necklace; and other bits that I hope to pass on to my daughters. These things help me feel part of a reassuring continuum.

George Clooney is emphatic about what should happen to looted art. ‘This isn’t controversial; this is really simple,’ he says. ‘The paintings were legitimately bought and paid for – they should be returned.’ The destruction and pillaging of culture and cultural artefacts has been a hallmark of conflicts since wars began. What set Hitler’s apart was not just the scale, but also his determination to expunge and erase the lives and identities of Jews and other ‘undesirables’. This is why, in my opinion, it is so important that our generation doesn’t, either by default, ambivalence, self-interest or inertia, enable Hitler to complete his goal. We must help families recover their memories and possessions. It is not simply about ownership or value; it’s about identity and, ultimately, love.