

Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
UNITED STATES

Plenary Session on Nazi-Confiscated Art Issues

When I was asked to be Chairman of the Commission for Art Recovery for the World Jewish Congress, I knew it would be a difficult task, but nothing prepared me for what lay ahead.

As you have just heard, although a great deal of art was found in salt mines, warehouses, trucks and trains, and many pieces were returned to the countries from which they were stolen – approximately 50% - 110,000 pieces of art worth between ten and thirty billion dollars today are still missing.

It is my belief, because of these large numbers, that every institution, art museum and private collection has some of these missing works.

I question how many great institutions have held works of art for 50 years, knowing that what they have held didn't belong to them, but to Jewish families. It is only now that they are being forced to take some action, action that they should have taken many, many years ago. How many homes have works of art hanging on their walls from Jewish families?

In France, after the war, many works were returned to prominent Jewish families. However, 15,000 works of art remained unclaimed, from which the French government allowed the museums in France to select the 2,000 best works, and the remaining 13,000 were auctioned off. Where is the record of these sales? Who benefited? These 2,000 works that remained in French museums have a special number.

France stopped trying to find owners after 1959. It was only in 1997, after being reminded by Hector Feliciano, that an exhibition was held, and a list was published of these 2,000 works. It is time for the provisional and temporary custody of the French museums to end. These works should be returned to the families who owned them, and where no families can be found, an auction should be held and the Jewish Communities of France should benefit.

The Austrian government took a giant step forward when it decided to hold an auction in 1996 of the works stored since the war at

Mauerbach. Today there is a complete search being done by the government of Austria itself of the holdings of all its federal museums. Research is being done to find the owners of the paintings that were taken between 1938 and 1945.

The Netherlands also has works for which no owners were found: they were placed in the care of the Netherlands Art Foundation. Although they knew that there were objects in the museums that were stolen from Jewish families, it was only after other countries started to do their research that the Netherlands decided to look for pre-war owners. They now have identified 3,900 works of art, and the government estimates it will take three years to complete the research project. It can be done in 6 months. An auction should be held.

Germany also received art that it knew came from Jewish families. Did they try to find the owners or their heirs? No. They simply set up a trust: the Gemälde Treuhand Verwaltung and distributed it among museums.

In the Czech Republic, the museum in Brno acknowledges that it has art once in the collection of the late Arthur Feldmann, whose grandson, Uri Peled, now lives in Israel. Mr. Peled maintains, correctly, that his family's collection of old master prints and drawings was looted by the Nazis. These works were subsequently nationalized by Czechoslovakia and the Slovakian Museum. They have refused to return the Feldmann works in their possession.

In Hungary, a portion of the collection of the Hatvany family is now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. The Hatvany heirs are getting nowhere in their efforts. Sixty years later!

A great portion of the art that was not deemed appropriate for German museums or for the new museum that was being created in Linz, was sold through dealers to Switzerland. Douglas Cooper, the British investigator, reported in 1945 that Switzerland had been the prime destination. He identified quite a number of private collectors and sixteen dealers in Switzerland who trafficked in Nazi-looted art. Chief among these was Theodore Fischer, auctioneer and dealer, and Emil Bührle, industrialist and collector. Paul Rosenberg, the eminent French Jewish art dealer whose collection had been looted from a bank vault in Libourne, traced thirteen of his pictures to Bührle. (He had to bring a court case to strike a deal, in which Bührle bought from Paul Rosenberg the stolen Rosenberg pictures Bührle had already bought.)

Since Switzerland was neutral, the Allies could not monitor trade there. No one knows how many looted works were sent to Switzerland. Switzerland's recent investigation into the past of the art owned by the

Swiss Confederation is a step in the right direction. But it doesn't even touch on the holdings of the majority of Swiss museums, private foundations or private collections.

No one knows how many "hot" works are in Swiss bank vaults or free ports – even today.

No one knows how many works went through neutral Switzerland to Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and from there to the United States and other collecting countries.

In the United States, there are many works of art that have come here right after the war and into the 1950's and 1960's through a second or third party.

The United States is perhaps the most active country in finding works of art through its Association of Art Museum Directors, ("AAMD"). They met this past June and worked out guidelines for a complete and thorough investigation of the provenance of all art for all their museums, to determine if any of their works of art could have been looted works from the Nazi era.

Perhaps the most important job my Commission is doing is working on a database, so that we can cross-reference all works of art looted during the Nazi era. And we will have as close as possible a complete list.

This summer we did an experiment. We began to see what we could uncover by going through catalogues: catalogues of permanent collections and special exhibitions. My staff went to over 225 books of museum collections and catalogues and found more than 1,700 works that could be war loot. It is clearly much more widespread than museum directors had thought.

We have a list of Nazi collaborators. Any work with those names in the ownership history could be unrecovered Nazi loot. We are comparing this art with claims from families, and we'll let them know if there is a match.

We invite you to send us the information, and we would welcome your cooperation. But if you do not want to work with us in this way, we will review all your publications anyway and find the works with dubious provenance.

In the fifty years since the end of the war, the art world forgot, maybe it chose to forget, the Nazi depredations – but we will not. Some of the most notorious names appear in scholarly catalogues. Goering's name is there! The Linz Museum is there! In some German museum catalogues, the provenance states that the art was "taken from the possession of Jews between 1933 and 1945!" I hope that this is an

honest way of serving notice to possible claimants, and I have been told that the museum will soon contact the Commission. Perhaps we can work together to find the heirs to these paintings.

Some of the names of the most famous looted collections appear in published provenances. Were all these works of art restituted and legitimately re-sold? Of course not. There is either a collective amnesia or a brazen openness in including these names in the published provenances. But there they are. And they will go into the Commission's database to be matched against art claimed by looted families.

It is time for museums to set the same standard for ownership that they expect of themselves for authenticity. Is the art genuine? Is the art genuinely theirs?

Together, in the next few years, we must find out. We must set the record straight, and put art back in the hands of the families from whom it was stolen, simply because they were Jewish. For many members of this generation, art is the only connection they have to members of their family who perished in the Holocaust.

These works of art that were looted are the last "prisoners of war." We do not want to wait. We will find these works of art – now.