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The Mysterious Journey of an Erotic Masterpiece



Baron Hatvany's self-portrait.

Femme nue couchée, one of several Courbets owned by the Hungarian Jewish collector Baron Ferenc Hatvany, disappeared after World War II from a Budapest bank vault. The painting resurfaced 50 years later in Slovakia, setting off a cat-and-mouse game that resulted in its restitution to Hatvany's heirs—who loaned it to the Courbet retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris



OPPOSITE Courbet's *Femme nue couchée*, 1862, was lost for 50 years. **ABOVE** Before World War II, it belonged to Baron Ferenc Hatvany and graced his Budapest salon, along with Manet's *Méry Laurent with a Pug Dog*, 1882.

The Gustave Courbet show opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on the 27th of this month is the largest retrospective devoted to the artist in 30 years. Organized by the Met with the Réunion des Musées

Nationaux in France, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, it will provide an opportunity for a new generation to discover the work of a major figure in the history of 19th-century art.

BY KONSTANTIN AKINSHA

When the show opened last fall at the Grand Palais in Paris (see review, page 131), it included a masterpiece, *Femme nue couchée* (Reclining Nude), that wasn't in the 1977 retrospective, because it was lost for 50 years. (At press time, the Met could not confirm that the picture would travel to New York.) Well known to art historians, it is completely unfamiliar to

the general public. *Femme nue couchée* disappeared without a trace at the end of World War II and was recovered by its legal owners only two years ago. The story of its recovery, featuring a Russian commander, a stalled train, lawyers, major auction houses, and police on both sides of the Atlantic, reads like a thriller.

Before World War II, the painting belonged to a famous Hungarian art collector, Baron Ferenc Hatvany, a descendant of one of the wealthiest

Jewish families in Hungary. Sugar refineries

had made the Hatvany very rich in the 19th century, and Emperor Franz Josef had granted them a title of nobility. They played an important role in Hungarian cultural life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Born in 1881, Ferenc Hatvany was a talented painter and a graduate of the Académie Julien in Paris. He enjoyed the art life of both Paris and Budapest and amassed an art collection of

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more than 700 works. Hatvany collected Old Masters and Hungarian art, but his true passion was 19th-century French painting. Canvases by Ingres, Delacroix, Chassériau, Corot, Manet, Pissarro, and Renoir adorned his sumptuous villa in the Buda hills.

Courbet had a special place in Hatvany's collection. *L'Origine du monde*, one of the most notorious paintings in the history of art, belonged to him. This close-up of a woman's genitalia had been commissioned in 1866 by the Ottoman diplomat Khalil Bey, who lost it two



Hatvany also owned Courbet's notorious *L'Origine du monde*, 1866. It later belonged to the famous psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

years later when his ruinous passion for gambling compelled him to auction his collection at the Hotel Drouot in Paris. *L'Origine du monde*, however, was not among the works on sale. It had disappeared, and it remained missing for 44 years, until November 26, 1912, when a certain Madame Viale sold another painting by Courbet to the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in Paris.

That painting is described in the sales contract as a "landscape—seashore (castle-fortress)," and that is what it is. But the landscape was also the cover of a case concealing *L'Origine du monde*. In June 1913 Hatvany bought both works from the gallery. He sold the landscape-cover to his brother-in-law, Baron Mór Lipót Herzog, another famous Hungarian collector. Today the landscape, known as *The Castle of Neufchâtel*, is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Hatvany bought a second erotic Courbet that year from the Berlin dealer Paul Cassirer. *Femme nue couchée* had once belonged to the duc de Wagram and later to the legendary Hungarian collector Marcell Nemes. Hatvany also owned Courbet's large *Wrestlers* (now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest), *Women*

Bathing in a Wood, *Portrait of Jules Bordet*, *The Wave*, and a still life. This was undoubtedly one of the most important private collections of Courbet's paintings in the world.

The Hatvany treasures survived the Hungarian revolution of 1918. Confiscated by the revolutionary government, the masterpieces were returned to their owner after the fall of the short-lived red republic. During the interwar period, the art-filled Hatvany villa was a gathering place for artists, connoisseurs, and such important visitors to Budapest as Thomas Mann.

Everything changed in the second half of the '30s, when Hungary fell under the influence of Nazi Germany. Racial laws were introduced, and ultrarightist politicians spewed anti-Semitic rhetoric, but the Jews of Hungary were slow to react. In 1940 Hatvany exhibited some of his treasures, including *Femme nue couchée*, at the Countess Éva Almássy-Teleki Institute of Art in Budapest. It was the last time the painting was seen in public until last year, when the current retrospective opened in Paris.

After Hungary entered the war, circumstances worsened for the country's Jews. In 1942, after the first bombing of Budapest by the Allies in September, Hatvany finally understood the danger. He deposited 350 masterpieces from his collection in the vaults of three Budapest banks, in the names of two gentile employees. *Femme nue couchée* found temporary refuge in the safe of the Hungarian General Credit Bank. The large *Wrestlers* remained in the villa, because no bank safe was large enough to hold it.

Two years later, Nazi SS officers occupied the Hatvany villa. During the winter of 1944-45, hundreds of thousands of Budapest Jews were deported to Auschwitz or murdered by Hungarian Nazis.

Hatvany survived the Holocaust in hiding, but his collection suffered. The paintings in the bank vaults disappeared, and his villa was looted, first by the SS and then by Hungarian Nazis, before being destroyed by bombs.

The fate of the paintings remained a mystery until the end of the cold war. Not until the period of perestroika, in the late '80s, was it revealed that some of the Hatvany treasures were hidden in a museum in Nizhny Novgorod. The Red Army had allegedly found the paintings in the village of Reinberg, near Berlin, and taken them to Russia.

After the Soviet army conquered Budapest, the bank vaults were looted. It seems that the artworks weren't confiscated by official trophy brigades, whose mission was to collect property and ship it to the Soviet Union. The artworks fell into the hands of private looters. According to the Hungarian art historian István Genthon, a Soviet military vehicle with *Femme nue couchée* cut out of its frame and attached to the tarpaulin

was sighted on Castle Hill. Another source reported that Soviet troops drove through the streets of the ruined city in an open car, waving *L'Origine du monde*. It was a strange ceremony of humiliating the defeated enemy.

Hatvany's attempts and the efforts of Hungarian officials to persuade the Soviet military administration to recover the looted masterpieces were unsuccessful.

In 1946 Hatvany was approached by a Soviet officer who was apparently a native Hungarian (he spoke the language without an accent). The officer told the baron that he was willing to return his paintings to him for an appropriate reward. Hatvany ransomed ten canvases, which had been "liberated" from the Budapest bank vaults by Soviet troops, including Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* and *Portrait of Jules Bordet*, Ingres's *The Small Bather*, and works by Delacroix, Daumier, and Manet.

The following year Hatvany left Hungary, which was on the brink of a Communist takeover. He was granted official permission to export one painting from his collection—a work that lacked artistic value in the opinion of cultural officials. It was, of course, *L'Origine du monde*. The other paintings Hatvany had ransomed were taken out of the country after he left.

Hatvany spent his last years in his beloved Paris and in Switzerland. To support his family, he parted with his remaining treasures. Courbet's *Portrait of Jules Bordet* and Ingres's *The Small Bather* went to Knoedler Galleries in New York. The portrait is now in the National Museum of Sweden in Stockholm. Ingres's masterpiece was bought by Laughlin Phillips and became one of the highlights of his museum in Washington, D.C. In 1955 *L'Origine du monde* was sold at auction for 1.5 million francs. Its new owner was the famous psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. It is now in the Musée d'Orsay.

Hatvany's walls were bare. He often visited the Louvre, sketching one pastel after another of galleries filled with paintings. He died in 1958.

AMONG THE ARTWORKS the Red Army allegedly found in the village of Reinberg were paintings from a number of Hungarian collections. The Hatvany works included Tintoretto's *Portrait of a Venetian Nobleman*, Corot's *Portrait of Madame Gambay*, and Édouard Manet's pastel-and-gouache *Méry Laurent with a Pug Dog*. The paintings were transported to the USSR not as official trophies but as the private loot of officers of the 49th Army.

The 49th Army was never in Hungary. There is no reason to doubt the information that Soviet troops found the paintings in Reinberg, but it is not clear how artworks from a number of Hungarian collections made their way to this obscure village. It is especially mysterious because some

of Hatvany's paintings found by Soviet troops in Reinberg were deposited in the same bank vaults as those paintings he succeeded in buying back from the Soviet officer in 1946.

More than ten years after the revelation that artworks from Hungarian Jewish collections were hidden in Russia, they remain in Russia, which is in no hurry to return them. Hatvany's Manet and Corot hang on the walls of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. In 1995 director Irina Antonova borrowed them from Nizhny Novgorod for an exhibition of



trophy art, called "Twice Saved," and never returned them. Last year Antonova stated that restitution "will never take place."

Antonova has said many times that Russia has the right to keep the art treasures taken from the Axis countries as compensation for the cultural property Russia lost during the war. But many of those treasures, like the Hatvany paintings, belonged to people who were themselves victims of the Nazis.

FEMME NUE COUCHÉE was not among the paintings hidden in Russia. It had vanished without a trace.

In 2002 a man from Slovakia, who claimed to be an antiques dealer, approached Sotheby's and showed officials a painting he wanted to sell. It was Courbet's white-stockinged nude. He was told that Sotheby's couldn't sell it. The painting had been looted after World War II and was listed at the Art Loss Register by the Commission for Art Recovery (CAR) in New York.

The painting had actually surfaced in Hungary two years earlier. In 2000 an intermediary acting for the antiques dealer offered to sell the work to

Sarah Faunce (left), author of the forthcoming Courbet catalogue raisonné, examining *Femme nue couchée* shortly after its recovery.

the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. László Lengyel, head of the museum's records department, who conducted negotiations with the intermediary, decided not to disclose to him the provenance of the painting for fear that it might be damaged or destroyed. Instead he tried to buy time. Lengyel went to Slovakia and was shown



Corot's *Portrait of Madame Gumbay*, from the Hatvany collection, was taken to the Soviet Union after World War II and is now in the Pushkin Museum.

the painting. It was in the possession of men he described as "bodybuilders with shaved heads." It was obvious that the people he had encountered were not traditional art dealers.

Lengyel discussed the offer with Miklós Mojzer, then general director of the museum. To buy the painting, the museum needed the support of the ministry of culture and the Hungarian government, which was impossible to get. After some time, the intermediary visited the museum again and warned Lengyel that there were people who wanted to grab the painting from the antiques dealer. He offered to sell it immediately for \$800,000. Museum officials rejected the offer and finally called the art squad of the Hungarian police, which took no action.

Surprisingly museum officials didn't notify the police or the legal owners of the painting when the negotiations started, although they knew where to find the Hatvany heirs. Those heirs were already suing the museum, demanding the return of works from Hatvany's collection that had been appropriated by the Hungarian Communist government after 1948. Instead of trying to prevent a crime, museum officials were attending meetings with the Slovak Mafia and seriously discussing the possibility of purchasing looted property for their collection.

How did *Femme nue couchée* make its way to the mountains of Slovakia? In 1945 a Soviet military train from Hungary was snowed in near a Slovak village. A group of Red Army soldiers climbed down, located a local doctor, and at gunpoint escorted him to the train. Their commander was suffering from a severe case of gonorrhea, which he had contracted in liberated Budapest.

Fortunately the treatment was effective and the patient's pain assuaged. The grateful warrior rewarded the doctor with a painting. It was *Femme nue couchée*, which adorned the doctor's modest dwelling until he died, in 1989. Then the work came into the possession of the antiques dealer.

In 2003 a representative of the dealer went to London and again visited Sotheby's. This time he asked the officials for an introduction to the heirs of Ferenc Hatvany. The Slovaks had realized that they couldn't sell the painting. Sotheby's told him that the Commission for Art Recovery (CAR) represented the Hatvany heirs.

The commission was founded by Ronald Lauder to identify and recover looted property. The discovery of the lost Courbet provoked excitement in its New York office. According to attorney Charles Goldstein, council to the commission, no one imagined that the recovery of the painting would turn into a prolonged game of hide-and-seek with the Slovak dealer.

CAR offered the holder of the painting a deal. The canvas would be sold by him in London, and the proceeds split equally. The Slovak dealer turned it down, demanding an up-front payment of €500,000 (\$600,000). CAR countered with an offer of €300,000 (\$360,000). The dealer refused again, and contact was interrupted. In the meantime, dubious characters were offering the painting to art dealers in London. They all declined to buy it and informed the Art Loss Register.

When he couldn't sell the painting in Western Europe, the antiques dealer decided to try his luck closer to home. In 2004 a young official of the Bratislava branch of a respected Austrian bank, working in the department of private banking, contacted CAR, demanding \$1.5 million for the painting, which he said was sitting in

his vault as collateral for a loan. The banker threatened to sell it if CAR refused to pay. Shocked, Goldstein demanded an explanation from the Austrian bank. The official in Bratislava was immediately fired, but the Courbet was lost again.

These maneuvers inevitably attracted the attention of law-enforcement agencies. Interpol, through the FBI, and the Slovak police asked for information about the antiques dealer and the painting. After it was provided, a lawyer working for CAR in Bratislava received threats and resigned from the case.

The Slovak police didn't take the matter too seriously until the U.S. embassy intervened. The antiques dealer was interviewed, but then, unexpectedly, the case was dropped. The Slovaks told Goldstein that they couldn't continue their investigation, because the Hungarian police had failed to provide any evidence that the painting was stolen.

CAR protested that Hungary had no official registry of cultural property confiscated from Holocaust victims, and the Slovak prosecutor ordered the investigation reopened, but the police failed to comply. Goldstein decided not to rely on the Slovak police. In 2005 CAR offered a reward of €250,000 (\$300,000) for the return of the Courbet. The reward was intended to capture the attention of the Slovak press, and it succeeded; the story of the looted masterpiece was widely publicized. The painting was rendered unsalable in Slovakia as well as London.

The attention of the police and the press, and the near impossibility of selling the painting, convinced the antiques dealer to resume negotiations with CAR.

There was another, completely unexpected problem. At some moment Ferenc Hatvany decided to demonstrate his skills as a painter and play a practical joke at the same time. He was friendly with Prince Paul of Yugoslavia, a well-known collector, who fancied himself an art expert and connoisseur. Hatvany painted a copy of *Femme nue couchée* and sent it to an exhibition in Belgrade, where it was hailed as the creation of the French master.

So a question arose about the painting in Slovakia. Was this newly resurfaced picture Courbet's work or Hatvany's? Fortunately an old glass negative of the original was discovered in a Hungarian collection, enabling a print the size of the painting to be produced. The painting's craquelure—the fine pattern of cracks that forms in an old paint layer—could be checked against the print.

Inspection proved that the painting the Russian commander had given the Slovak doctor was the one created by Courbet. The reward was paid, the painting was returned, and the police investigation of the Slovak antiques

dealer was dropped at CAR's request. But it was still necessary to obtain an export permit. Unexpectedly it took many months and more U.S. embassy intervention in Bratislava. Permission was finally granted, and the painting left for Vienna under armed escort.

Femme nue couchée was returned to its right-



ful owners, the heirs of Baron Hatvany, and the story ended happily.

The recovery of Courbet's masterpiece proves that positive changes have occurred since 2001, when the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets took place. The thwarted efforts of the Slovak dealer show that it is now almost impossible to sell looted art in Europe. But the case also brought to light an unfortunate fact.

"Surprisingly it was easier to secure recovery of art looted during the Holocaust from the Slovakian dealer than from Hungarian and Russian government officials," Goldstein noted sadly. "Paintings that belonged to Ferenc Hatvany are still hanging on museum walls in Budapest, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod." ■

Portrait of Madame Gombay in Hatvany's Budapest salon before the war.