

Happy ending for looted Courbet painting in Paris exhibit

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PARIS: For decades, art lovers believed the painting was lost, maybe even destroyed, a casualty of Red Army or Nazi looting in Hungary during World War II. But unlike so many other tales of looted treasures, this one has a happy ending.

Gustave Courbet's sensuous "Femme nue couchee" (Nude Woman Reclining) — showing a tousle-haired, sleeping woman in white stockings and little else — is on show starting Saturday at the Grand Palais, in Paris' first retrospective on the convention-smashing 19th century Realist master in 30 years. The show heads to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in February.

During World War II, the 1862 Courbet nude belonged to great Hungarian collector Baron Ferenc Hatvany, who also owned the painter's most infamous work — "L'Origine du Monde" (The Origin of the World), an astonishingly graphic close-up of a naked woman with her legs spread.

But amid wartime looting in Hungary by the Red Army, Nazis and locals, the paintings were stolen from the bank vault where the baron had put them for safekeeping, said Charles Goldstein, a lawyer for the Commission for Art Recovery, founded by the World Jewish Congress.

The baron, who was Jewish, survived the war but lost all his art, the largest collection in Hungary, Goldstein said. He tracked down and bought back some of his lost works, including "L'Origine du Monde," but he never knew what happened to the other Courbet nude.

The story began unraveling several years ago, when a Slovakian family approached an auction house with the painting.

During the war, "Femme nue couchee" wound up in the possession of a Soviet soldier, who carried it — rolled-up — into Slovakia.

There, he gave the painting to a Bratislava doctor as a gift. The doctor, who may not have realized its true value, put it on his wall, where it stayed for decades, until he died and his family attempted to sell it at an auction house, Goldstein said.

After negotiations — and a €500,000 (\$706,000) reward for the doctor's family — the painting was returned two years ago to the baron's heirs, who lent it for the exhibit, said Goldstein, who estimated the painting's worth at around US\$15 million (€10.6 million). Goldstein's commission has represented the baron's heirs in the process.

Hundreds of works from the baron's collection are still missing today, while some are hanging on the walls of museums in Russia, which refuses to return them, Goldstein said.

Laurence des Cars, a co-curator for the exhibit, called the Courbet nude "exceptional" and said its rediscovery was a "major event." Paris' Musee d'Orsay is looking for a patron to help it purchase the painting, a spokeswoman for the national museum board said.

The painting hangs alongside many other gems in the breathtaking Paris exhibit. Courbet, who lived from 1819-1877, fought his entire career to free himself from the period's artistic constraints and to paint the real world as he saw it.

The French art world was stunned when he painted a family funeral in his hometown of Ornans on a huge scale, more than 3 meters (nearly 10 feet) high and nearly 7 meters (23 feet) long — a size that once would have been reserved for major historical paintings. Courbet elevated an ordinary family to the importance of royalty.

His "Baigneuse" (Woman Bathing) shocked his contemporaries because they found his model too old, too saggy, too overweight. Courbet found her authentic.

Other paintings still shock, even today. Many owners of the racy "L'Origine du Monde" kept it concealed — the Hungarian baron put it in his bathroom, while the celebrated psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan bought it and hid it behind a panel that he uncovered for guests.

The exhibit puts the tableau next to a makeshift peepshow: Gallery-goers peer into peepholes to see pornography from Courbet's era that is reminiscent of his famous painting.

Dominique de Font-Reaulx, a co-curator of the exhibit, believes Courbet's provocations were a way of protecting his tender side — apparent in his paintings of his sisters, his self-portraits and his landscapes.

"It seemed important to have another look at this painter, because despite his fame, I'm not certain that people really know what he was all about," she said.

"Gustave Courbet" runs at the Grand Palais through Jan. 28, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from Feb. 27 to May 18, and at the Musee Fabre in Montpellier, France, from June 14 to Sept. 28.