

Profit and loss

Print

By Peter Aspden

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Georges Jorisch is now 81, a retired camera store manager living in Montreal, Canada, but his early childhood was gilded with magnificence. Born in Vienna in 1928, a city then the intellectual beacon for the whole of Europe, he was part of a wealthy Jewish family at the epicentre of a vibrant cultural scene.

Most notably, there was great-uncle Viktor Zuckerkandl, a steel magnate, and his wife Paula, patrons and friends of the city's artists, whom they loved to entertain at their home in the Viennese suburb of Purkersdorf. And what a home it was: a modernist masterpiece that Viktor commissioned in 1903 from Josef Hoffman, the superstar architect of the time.

A health centre for the treatment of neurological disorders and a home for the Zuckerkandls, the Westend Sanatorium attracted the city's cultural elite, among them the playwright Arthur Schnitzler and the composers Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg. It was no accident that the sanatorium doubled as a venue for bohemian dinner parties: it was testament to the early 20th-century theory that the greatest art and architecture have a redemptive quality – that they are literally good for your health.

No matter that the city of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Sigmund Freud, and Ludwig Wittgenstein had put the human condition under such psycho-sexual scrutiny that it groaned beneath the strain. Culture, it exhorted, was the way forward: humanity's only hope for progress in the wake of a war that had shown its capacity for barbarism.

The Zuckerkandls were avid collectors of contemporary art and showed off their acquisitions in their fashionable residence. When they died childless, their home and its contents passed to Viktor's sister Amalie and her daughter Mathilde, mother of Georges. And it was in Purkersdorf that the young boy became enraptured by one of the paintings in his family's collection.



The Westend Sanatorium, outside Vienna, where the painting was once housed

It was a landscape by Klimt, painted in 1913 while on holiday at Lake Garda in Italy with his lover and muse Emilie Flöge. It showed the church in the village of Cassone, a monumental building nestled among cypress trees and small, cube-like houses that led down to the lake. The flat, geometric shapes of the painting were typical of the radical new aesthetic of the Wiener Werkstätte movement; the jewel-like, mosaic composition reflected Klimt's own mastery of decorative embellishment.

Jorisch describes the painting with the startling simplicity of a childhood recollection: "I just loved the way the town went right down into the water," he tells me in a telephone conversation from Montreal, where he has lived since the 1950s.

"It was very striking. I liked it very much. I remember where it was placed in my grandmother's house, in a big room, with a big red carpet, that wasn't used very often. There were two paintings to the right and left of the window, and this is the one I remember."

His recollection of "Church in Cassone" is all the more remarkable since he has not seen the painting for more than 70 years. When the Nazis marched into Vienna in 1938, Jorisch's father, a lawyer, fled the city with Georges, and the 10-year-old was forced to say goodbye to his mother, to his favourite painting, and to his gilded childhood.

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Just before Christmas, I am ushered into the central London boardroom of Sotheby's in New

Bond Street to see, hanging above a mantelpiece, “Church in Cassone”. The painting suits its temporary home, dominating the severe room with a rare, luminous tranquillity. Myriad influences – cubism, folk tapestry, stained glass window techniques – are visible but, as with any masterpiece, descriptions are insufficient: to appreciate fully its radical qualities, you need to be there, standing in front of it.

“This is Klimt at his most pure,” says Helena Newman, vice-chairman worldwide of the auction house’s impressionist and modern art department. “Unlike the portraits, he is not locked into a social or personal depiction. He is outside the confines of Vienna, just responding to surfaces. It is naturalistic, yet it draws heavily on modern art.”

Her fervour is understandable, and not entirely disinterested: Sotheby’s is offering “Church in Cassone” for sale early next month at its London auction house. It estimates that the painting will be sold for £12m to £18m, a hefty amount for sure, although one that seems curiously muted considering some of the prices realised during the art market’s extended pre-credit crunch bubble, which made multimillionaires of the likes of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons.



Yet the price is almost the least interesting thing about the sale of this particular painting. Gustav Klimt’s ‘Church in Cassone’ (1913)

When “Church in Cassone” is sold, the amount raised will – thanks to a legal agreement between the two parties – be split between the present owner, whom Sotheby’s declines to identify, and Georges Jorisch, who will be following events from his home more than 3,000 miles away.

The deal struck between the painting’s past and present owners is typical of a movement that over the past decade has transformed the nature of the art market, encouraging the restitution of works that once belonged to Jewish families but were then looted, or went missing, during the second world war.

The bulk of restitution claims came, unsurprisingly, in the immediate aftermath of the war. The Nazis were estimated to have stored some 5m objects of value in mines, castles and other depots between 1939 and 1945, according to evidence submitted to the House of Commons. With the war over, the triumphant Allied forces took charge of restoring them to their rightful owners.

The Soviet Union alone returned 1.5m art objects to the German Democratic Republic between 1955 and 1958, while the Americans and British restituted 2.5m cultural artefacts in the five years that followed the war, of which nearly 500,000 were paintings, drawings and sculptures. But, inevitably, in the chaos of postwar Europe, thousands of claims remained unsettled and thousands of works of art simply went missing altogether. Such was the fate that befell “Church in Cassone”.

Georges Jorisch and his father spent the war in hiding, including two years living in a cellar in Brussels where Jorisch recalls his father teaching him Latin to pass the time. His mother and grandmother, having underestimated the consequences of Anschluss, had decided to stay behind in Vienna but were deported to the Lodz ghetto in Poland in 1941. No one knows what became of them.

Before their deportation, however, Jorisch’s grandmother Amalie had taken steps to protect her art collection, which she had put into storage with a respected shipping company, bribing the foreman an extra 2,000 Reichsmarks for added insurance.

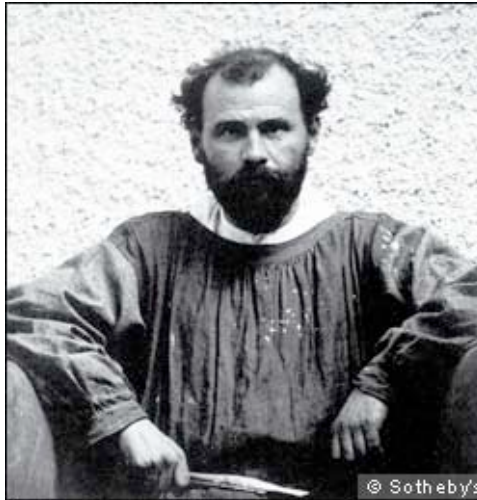
But it counted for little. When Jorisch returned to Vienna after the war with his father, they located the crates, only to find them empty. The shipping company blamed the Soviet forces. But, echoing his father’s scepticism at the time, Jorisch says: “The Russians weren’t so interested in paintings, they only took watches.”

The painting was not seen again, presumed lost or destroyed, but then in 1962 it turned up at an exhibition in Graz honouring the centenary of Klimt’s birth. It was in a private collection, its prewar history apparently forgotten. By the 1960s, the fervour to reconstitute works of art was fizzling out: it was as if the generation that had lived through the horrors of the war had little appetite to dwell further on past injustice. “They just wanted to get on with their new lives,” says Helena Newman.

But in 1998, following the opening up of eastern Europe, came the Washington Conference on Holocaust-era assets, attended by 40 countries and a watershed for the restitution debate. It established new principles for the settling of claims by victims of the Holocaust and their heirs. “It was essentially a fairness charter,” says Lucian Simmons, head of Sotheby’s restitution department. “It

gave victims the benefit of the doubt, and it allowed museums, which may have been constricted by public policy from giving away their works, to apply the new criteria.”

A steady stream of new restitution claims came to court. One of these made headlines in 2006, when a Klimt portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer belonging to the Austrian Gallery in the Belvedere Palace was ordered by an Austrian court to be restituted to the heirs of the Bloch-Bauer family. It was subsequently sold privately to Ronald Lauder for his Neue Galerie in New York for a reported \$135m, making it at the time the most expensive work of art ever sold. “This is our ‘Mona Lisa,’” Lauder told the press.



A few months later, Christie’s sold a second portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, this time at auction, for nearly \$88m: it remains the third most expensive work of art to be sold at auction. Three more Klimts were sold by their new owners at the same sale.

Georges Jorisch declines to reveal precisely when he began to pursue his claim for “Church in Cassone”, but the deal he has made with the painting’s present owner Gustav Klimt was brokered by Sotheby’s, resulting in next month’s auction. “It has not been quick,” says Simmons when I ask if negotiations have been protracted. Most restored works are sold by their new owners, making restitution a lucrative business for the auction houses: it accounted for \$90m of sales at Sotheby’s alone last year, says the firm.

Although details of the split between the two parties have not been revealed, Simmons says the talks between them were not marked by any hostility. “Both sides have entered into the agreement in good faith. It is very much a willing compromise.”

I ask him what kind of reaction he receives when he first approaches owners of works of art to tell them that there may be a restitution issue at stake. “They are shocked, but sympathetic. In the vast majority of cases, people are even-keeled about it. They recognise there is a difficult issue at stake, and want to try to sort it out. The current owners of these works have acted in good faith – there are two innocent parties [in these cases]. Both are victims, although victims in very different ways.”

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Jorisch’s memories of his Viennese childhood are inevitably fragmented. He says he remembers clearly watching the Nazi tanks roll past his home at Purkersdorf, and the previous night’s radio broadcast when Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian chancellor, tried to reassure his people. “He said, ‘God protects Austria,’ and my parents said, ‘We are poorly served.’”

But “Church in Cassone” remains vividly imprinted in his mind, as do the Zuckermandls’ views of the man who painted it. “Although Klimt was a very good friend of my great-uncle Viktor, he was not so popular in our house – they said he had 17 illegitimate children!”

Loose in morals he might have been, but it is Klimt, in his decorative, erotic tableaux, who has come to symbolise that luxuriant air of fin-de-siècle Vienna more than any other artist. The city’s cultural supremacy survived one world war, but it couldn’t make it through another. Its jewels were lost, destroyed, dispersed. But now they are making their presence felt once more, realising fantastic sums of money and finding new homes among the world’s super-rich.

I ask Jorisch how he feels about the sale of “Church in Cassone” and he is magnanimous. “It will find its place in the world. It is not only a painting, it is a piece of history. It was painted in the last year before the [first world] war, so it has a special significance – it is the last piece of Austria-Hungary. It all fell apart after that.”

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Jackie Wullschlager on great art plundered by the Nazis

Over the past half century, many great works have left or joined museums as a consequence of Nazi theft.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 'Street Scene' (1913). One of the greatest modern German paintings was owned by Jewish shoe manufacturer Alfred Hess and sent to Zurich's Kunsthaus for safekeeping when the Hess family emigrated. Although Kirchner was labelled degenerate, the Nazis threatened Hess relatives still in Germany unless the work was returned, then forced an artificially low sale in 1936. The work hung in Frankfurt's Städel Museum after the war and, from 1980, in Berlin's Brücke Museum. Restituted to Hess's granddaughter in 2006, it sold at Christie's for \$38m to Ronald Lauder for his Neue Galerie.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's 'Street Scene' (1913)

Henri Matisse, 'Bathers with a Turtle' (1908). Plundered from Essen's Folkwang Museum as degenerate, sold at a scandalous auction for Nazi profit at Galerie Fischer in Lucerne in 1939. The artist's son Pierre attended with collector Joseph Pulitzer, who recalled: "We were faced with a terrible conflict – a moral dilemma. If the work was bought, we knew the money was going to a regime we loathed. If ... not, we knew it would be destroyed. To safeguard the work for posterity, I bought – defiantly!" The Pulitzer family donated "Bathers" to Saint Louis Art Museum in 1964.

Lucas Cranach, 'Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden' (1530). Arrived at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, in 1971 after an extraordinary journey from Russia. In 1931, the hard-up Soviet Union consigned the two exquisite wood panels for auction in Berlin. Jewish-Dutch dealer Jacques Goudstikker bought them and his firm sold them to the Nazis under duress. Goudstikker later settled with the Dutch government, and ownership was transferred to George Stroganoff-Scherbatoff – a Russian aristocrat who said the Bolsheviks had confiscated the panels from his family. He sold them to the Norton Simon but, in an unsettled case, Goudstikker's heir is demanding restitution.

Marc Chagall, 'Over Vitebsk' (1915-20). This classic work was acquired by Dresden Museum in 1925 and sold in 1936 to Kurt Feldhausser, a German collector who mopped up numerous "degenerate" works. When he was killed in an air raid in 1944, his mother inherited the picture and sold it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949.

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