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### **“The shame of the Mauerbach Auction”**

Provenance Researcher Lillie calls it one of “the major scandals of the Second [Austrian] Republic”: the owners of many of the artworks put up for auction in 1996 were known to the authorities.

*[Portrait caption]*

Amerling's “Lady from the Orient” [Morgenlaenderin], belonged to Wilhelm Freund, was put up for auction as an “orphaned object”.

*[Label caption]*

The backs of the paintings as mute witnesses: The owners of many “orphaned” pictures (for instance, that of Wilhelm Freund), could have been found.

Vienna – On December 2 an extraordinary exhibition, organized by Alexandra Reininghaus, will open in the MAK [Austrian Museum of Applied Art, Contemporary Art]. “Recollecting” displays a bonanza of art and everyday objects as well as their story during the period when they were looted by the Nazis and to the time of their subsequent restitution. The show is being augmented by works, among others, by Ines Doujak, Vera Fren, Rainer Ganahl, Christian Philipp Mueller and Lisl Ponger.

The MAK was “particularly suited as a venue” for the show, according to the press release, among others because it was “in 1966 the site of the Mauerbach Benefit Auction”. With that auction, the MAK claimed, the museum “sent a clear signal”. At that time it put works of art, considered “orphaned”, up for auction. In many cases these holdings were not orphaned as Sophie Lillie, a provenance researcher, can prove. As a result of the auction, conducted by Christie's, it became impossible for rightful owners ever to get the works back into their possession.

The shameful series of events began at the end of the forties, early fifties. The U.S. Army transferred thousands of objects recovered at various locations in Austria to the government. The official preservation agency which had been involved originally in the expropriation was to restore the objects to their rightful owners. However little enthusiasm was evident for such undertaking. Lillie observed: “Over the years lists of objects were carefully prepared whose owners were actually known – without however feeling obligated to act on such information.”

Only when Simon Wiesenthal applied pressure in 1969 did the preservation agency publish a comprehensive list of eight-thousand “orphaned” art works and cultural goods in its care. Wiesenthal described it as the “Gallery of Tears”. Subsequently 1,231 objects were reclaimed – but only 72 were restored to claimants. All others became the property of the Austrian Republic which in return paid a discounted sum of five million shillings.

In December 1984 Andrew Decker, a journalist, wrote about the situation in “ARTnews”, a U.S. magazine. He described the existence of hundreds of artworks stored in the Mauerbach Carthusian Monastery as “A Legacy of Shame”. It was also the title of his article. Yet another inventory was published and drew 3,300 claims, but the state returned only 22 objects.

In the wake of growing media pressure the decision was made in 1995 to transfer most of the properties to the Jewish Cultural Communities [Israelitische Kultusgemeinden - IKG]. The objects were to be sold and the proceeds were to be donated to destitute Holocaust survivors.

Time had been of no essence for decades – suddenly everything had to happen rapidly. In November the objects were transported to a storage facility in the Schoenbrunn Castle where the IKG and Christie’s, respectively, took immediate possession. The objects were unpacked, photographed and appraised.

### **Labels of significance**

Staying on top of the “spectacle”, Sophie Lillie noted that many pictures carried labels, stamps, seals, names, numbers on the back. “I did not understand the notations, but I had an idea that they had some significance.” Lillie asked Paul Grosz, president of the IKG at the time, if she could photograph the backs of the pictures. He gave her the keys to the storage facility and allegedly instructed her: “Do so.” Two friends, Uli Kohl and Stefan Oláh, performed the job.

At the time Sophie Lillie did not succeed in determining the meaning of the notations. Only after Schiele’s Wally portrait was confiscated from the Leopold collection in January 1998 and the subsequent instructions from Elisabeth Gertner, the then Cultural Minister and a member of the OeVP [Austrian People’s Party], to open the archives to provenance research was Lillie able to start her detective work.

To date she has identified former owners of some 50 “orphaned” pictures, namely Wilhelm Freund, Arthus Loourié, Hermann Wilhelm Soltau, Robert Kobler, Leo Zipper, Elizabeth Fischer, Arthur Fuchs, etc. In her catalog she reports: “Austria kept its victims consciously in the dark. (...) A look into these documents at the time would not only have made the restitution of many Mauerbach objects possible, but also hundreds of other expropriated objects. However, the State strove to have the seemingly “orphaned properties” liquidated: “In order to take this last step, the settlement of cultural goods, Austria took advantage of the victims of Nazi terror – and thereby entangled honorable Jewish proponents in one the major scandals of the Second Republic.”

In his multifaceted room installation “Retracing the Tears” at the MAK, Arye Wachsmuth, Sophie Lillie’s husband, makes the mute witnesses to the expropriations his centerpiece: Endlessly the photos of the backs of the pictures flicker very slowly across the monitor.

Erika Jakobovits, general manager of the IKG, is aware of the dilemma: "At the time we raised questions repeatedly. We were given assurances that the objects which we assumed were orphaned goods. The Austrian Republic should now find a way to compensate former owners of the auctioned goods. We know how much each picture that was auctioned was worth." The Provenance Researcher Sophie Lillie calls it one of the major scandals of the Second Republic": The owners of many objects put up for sale at the Mauerbach auction in 1996 were known to the authorities.

(Article by Thomas Trenkler was published in the December 1, 2008 print edition of DER STANDARD]

Exhibition opens Tuesday, December 2 at 8 PM