

# Court hearing coming over a Baroque painting looted by Nazis

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An Italian criminal court is scheduled to hold a hearing Tuesday in Milan in a case involving a Baroque masterpiece looted from a private collection in Florence during World War II.

The hearing is just one taking place among three -- count 'em, three -- suits underway in criminal, civil and administrative jurisdictions in the tangled tale, as my colleague Jori Finkel [recently reported](#).) Missing for nearly 70 years, the stolen painting turned up on the Italian art market last summer. An export license allowing the painting to leave the country has been denied.

The facts around how Bernardo Strozzi's full-length figure of St. Catherine of Alexandria, painted circa 1615, was looted by the Nazis are not in dispute. The picture had been seized from its expatriate American owner in 1942 by the prefect of Florence under anti-Jewish "racial laws" issued by the Italian fascist regime.



That was bad enough. But now the story is marked by an appalling irony.

The Italian government spent several years in noisy litigation, retaliatory threats and indignant international public relations campaigns over what officials said were antiquities looted from Italian archaeological sites and housed in several American museum collections. Among those museums was the Getty Villa in Los Angeles, which agreed in 2007 to send back 40 disputed objects to Italy.

And who is the American heir to the Florentine collector whose looted Strozzi painting is now being tied up in tortuous Italian criminal, civil and administrative hearings?

She's Philippa Calnan, who, from 1984 to her retirement in 1995 was public affairs director at the J. Paul Getty Trust. (Full disclosure: I worked for Calnan for 10 months in 1979-80.) Like the theft, Calnan's status as heir to her grandfather's estate is not at issue.

The Italian government was happy to stake out the high moral ground to demand restitution of looted art stolen decades ago from its soil. However, when it comes to restitution of art looted by Nazis and fascists, apparently the Berlusconi government finds the matter to be less than pressing. The, shall we say, baroque Italian legal system is obstructing what should be a simple administrative procedure.

First time tragedy, second time farce. Since the facts of the theft are not in dispute, nor the painting's rightful heir, Italy's culture minister, Sandro Bondi, should intervene and issue the necessary export papers. The high moral ground demands it.