With works from Max Stern’s forced liquidation of his dealership by the Nazis still regularly turning up in Germany, two current case histories this page and opposite.

It is also likely that more works sold by Stern before he fled the country will resurface in the Rhineland this year, as they have over the past decade and more than 80 years later.

Stern’s career is set to remain at the centre of debates about Nazi-looted art. His life and work are the focus of a controversial conference in Düsseldorf on 13 February, and a new research project has received German government funding to explore his persecution by the Nazis.

Two restitution claims from the Stern estate for paintings could have broader repercussions. One concerns a work by Hans von Marées, now in the Bavarian State Painting Collections, which is under scrutiny by the government’s Advisory Panel on Nazi-looted Art; the other, a painting by Andreas Hals from the late 19th century, although it also sold contemporary art and Old Masters, Max took over the gallery after the death of his father in 1934, a year after all non-Nazi political parties had been outlawed. He wrote in his autobiography that “business was flourishing, when suddenly the Reichstag fire shook us out of our complacency and drew our attention to the constantly growing danger”.

Banned from art dealing in 1935, he had fled Germany and, after being interned in Britain and Canada, settled in Montreal in 1941. There he became the director and, later, the owner of the Dominion Gallery. Once again building a thriving art business, he died childless in 1987 and bequeathed the bulk of his estate to Concordia and McGill in Montreal, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 2002, the estate, known as the Max and Iris Stern Foundation, launched an initiative to recover his lost art, the Max Stern Art Restitution Project. The foundation is seeking around 400 works altogether; so far, it has recovered 18.

Whatever the value, what differentiates the Stern estate from other heirs attempting to retrieve works of art that were looted by the Nazis is its substantial resources and institutional background. In most cases, claims are filed by the families of Jewish collectors, who often have limited resources and time to spend tracking down art. The Max Stern Art Restitution Project, in contrast, has employed the provenance researcher Willy Korte as its chief investigator since 2002. It has support from the Canadian government as well as the three university legatees, and has cooperated with the Holocaust Claims Processing Office in New York, Interpol and US law enforcers to recover works.

“The unique support system means that we are not going away,” Korte says. “We are not going to die or run out of money.” Those resources also uniquely position the project to push for changes to restitution policies that may benefit other heirs trying to recover art, he says.

Another characteristic of Stern’s legacy is that the art itself is not all of museum quality. Korte says. Where individual heirs may decide it is not worth their while to chase works that are valued at only a few thousand euros, the Stern project operates according to the principle that all Nazi-looted art should be returned and does not prioritise the restitution of the more valuable paintings.

“There are countless works of art that were looted by the Nazis and still turn up at auction, but they will never be discovered because no one would be willing to pay for the research,” Korte says. “We pursue a painting worth $1,000 with the same seriousness and dedication as a $1m painting.”

RECENT DISPUTES

But the project’s determined pursuit of Stern’s looted art and its clear pro-restitution agenda has ruffled feathers in Germany – particularly in Stern’s home city. In 2017, the Düsseldorf mayor, Thomas Griesel, abruptly cancelled an exhibition initiated by the Max Stern Art Restitution Project, which was intended to pay homage to the dealer. Three months before it was due to open, citing “current demands for information and restitution in German museums in connection with the Galerie Max Stern.”

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