“We pursue a painting worth $1,000 with the same seriousness and dedication as a $1m painting”

Among those claims are two in Düsseldorf. The Max Stern Art Restitution Project has successfully recovered one painting from the city collections, but has outstanding claims for Wilhelm von Schadow’s ‘The Artist’s Children’ (1818), which once hung in the mayor’s office, and Sunset on the North Sea by Heinrich Heimes, in the Kunstmuseum’s collection. The city has rejected both claims.

Geisel later justified his decision to scrap the show by suggesting that the exhibition as it was originally conceived would be “one-sided”. But the last-minute cancellation sparked outrage from Jewish groups in Israel and Canada, both of which had planned to show the exhibition after its run in Germany. Düsseldorf’s chief culture official, Düsseldorf’s chief culture official, says: “Our rapport with the city of Düsseldorf would go ahead with the exhibition at a later date in a “more complete and revised form”, and would first hold a symposium on the dealer’s life and work.

But the Canadian curators of the exhibition, Catherine MacKenzie, a professor of art history from Montreal, and Andrea Bambi, a provenance researcher at the Bavarian State Painting Collections, and Luise Mahrer and Christel Fries from New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. “We would of course have liked the Canadian researchers to take part,” Lohe says. “But what is important is that we have the same goal: to find out more about the life and work of Max Stern, and to pay homage to his contribution.”

AN UNFORTUNATE TURN

Clarence Epstein, who manages the Max Stern Art Restitution Project, says: “Our rapport with the city of Düsseldorf took an unfortunate turn. We stood behind the original team of exhibition curators and understood completely why they have distanced themselves from any association with the city and its programming.”

The symptoms in February, entitled ‘Galerie Stern Within the Context of the Rhineland Art Trade During National Socialism’, will form the basis for the exhibition, which is now scheduled for the autumn of 2020.

Facing a chorus of indignation, Geisel reversed his decision and said Düsseldorf would go ahead with the exhibition at a later date in a “more complete and revised form”, and would first hold a symposium on the dealer’s life and work. But the Canadian curators of the exhibition, Catherine MacKenzie, a professor of art history from Montreal, and Andrea Bambi, a provenance researcher at the Bavarian State Painting Collections, and Luise Mahrer and Christel Fries from New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. “We would of course have liked the Canadian researchers to take part,” Lohe says. “But what is important is that we have the same goal: to find out more about the life and work of Max Stern, and to pay homage to his contribution.”

Separately from the Düsseldorf symposium, the Stern Cooperation Project began operating in July 2018 after receiving a grant of €120,000 from the German Lost Art Foundation. This research project, coordinated by the Zentrum für Zeitgeschichte (Central Institute for Art History) in Munich, will involve scholars from Israel and Canada—including MacKenzie—and is supported by two of Stern’s heirs, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Concordia. Rather than examining the fate of individual paintings, the project will focus on his biography and the experiences of his family and acquaintances during the Nazi era, says Stephan Klingon, a scholar at the ZIKG. Klingon says he has also declined to participate in the Düsseldorf symposium in solidarity with his Canadian and Israeli partners.

“This whole project has become so politicised,” Klingon says. “I have never experienced anything like it before.”

Hinrich Heimes’, Sunset on the North Sea (1891), is one of 400 works claimed by the Max Stern Art Restitution Project.

The Museum Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf withdrew the painting from an exhibition in July 2017, after the Max Stern Art Restitution Project filed a claim for it. The show featured works owned by a private collector, Wolfgang Peiffer, who had acquired Sicilian Landscape without knowing its provenance at a Phillips action in London in 1999. Its value is estimated at about €75,000.

Peiffer has said he believes Stern sold the painting in a “perfectly normal gallery transaction”. The restitution project argues that sales records show that Stern sold the Achenbach painting in 1937, when he was under pressure to liquidate his gallery fast before he fled Germany.

The painting is listed as missing from the Stern collection on the German government LostArt.de website. Peiffer’s lawyer filed a suit in May 2018 at the Magdeburg regional court, asking for the Achenbach painting and stock included in the Jewish owned gallery fast before he fled Germany.

This exhibition has been made possible thanks to the couture council.