

[ART JOURNAL]

Heirs race to find Nazi-looted art

An international conference in Prague this week aims to review restitution policies for hundreds of thousands artworks taken during World War II

BY SARAH MARSH
RETUERS, VIENNA

Eighty-one-year-old Thomas Selldorff, who fled Austria with his family before it was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, hopes an upcoming international conference will bolster efforts to return Nazi-looted art.

The Nazis seized more than 200 artworks owned by his grandfather, an avid art collector, as part of a policy of seizing Jewish property. So far, Selldorff has been able to retrieve only two of the lost paintings.

"I want to be able to pass these things on to my family ... I want them to have the link and an appreciation for some of the things my grandfather was involved with," said Selldorff, who lives in the US and wants to exhibit the altar pieces by Austrian baroque artist Kremser Schmidt in a museum.

Some 65 years after World War II, experts say thousands of artworks confiscated by the Nazis, including masterpieces by art nouveau master Gustav Klimt and expressionist Egon Schiele, still need to be restituted to their rightful owners.

Government officials from around 49 countries, dozens of non-governmental groups and Jewish representatives will meet in Prague this week to review current practices. They are likely to sign a new agreement to step up restitution efforts.

Some participants hope the conference will lead to the creation of a central body responsible for publishing updates on countries' progress, which could prompt them to do more.

The task of restituting Nazi-looted works is an epic one. The Nazis formed a bureaucracy devoted to looting and they plundered a total of 650,000 artworks and religious objects from Jews and other victims, the Jewish Claims Conference estimates.

Artworks were auctioned off, handed over to national museums or top Nazi officials, or stashed away for a Fuehrer museum Adolf Hitler was planning to build in the Austrian town of Linz, where he spent a part of his youth.

"This is one way that Jews were made to pay for their own elimination," said art restitution expert Sophie Lillie.

At the end of World War II, some works were returned, but many continued to circulate on the international art market or stayed put in museums, and it was only in the 1990s that there was a new burst of Holocaust restitution.

PATCHY RECORD

Austria is considered one of the leaders of art restitution efforts, putting its larger neighbor Germany to shame. The Alpine republic passed a law in 1988 governing art restitution and has since returned more than 10,000 artworks.

"There are a handful of countries that have achieved a lot," said Anne Webber, co-chair of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, citing Austria, the Netherlands and the UK.

Austria's Belvedere Gallery has had to retitle 10 paintings by Gustav Klimt, including two portraits of Adele Bloch-Bauer that are among the artist's most famous works.

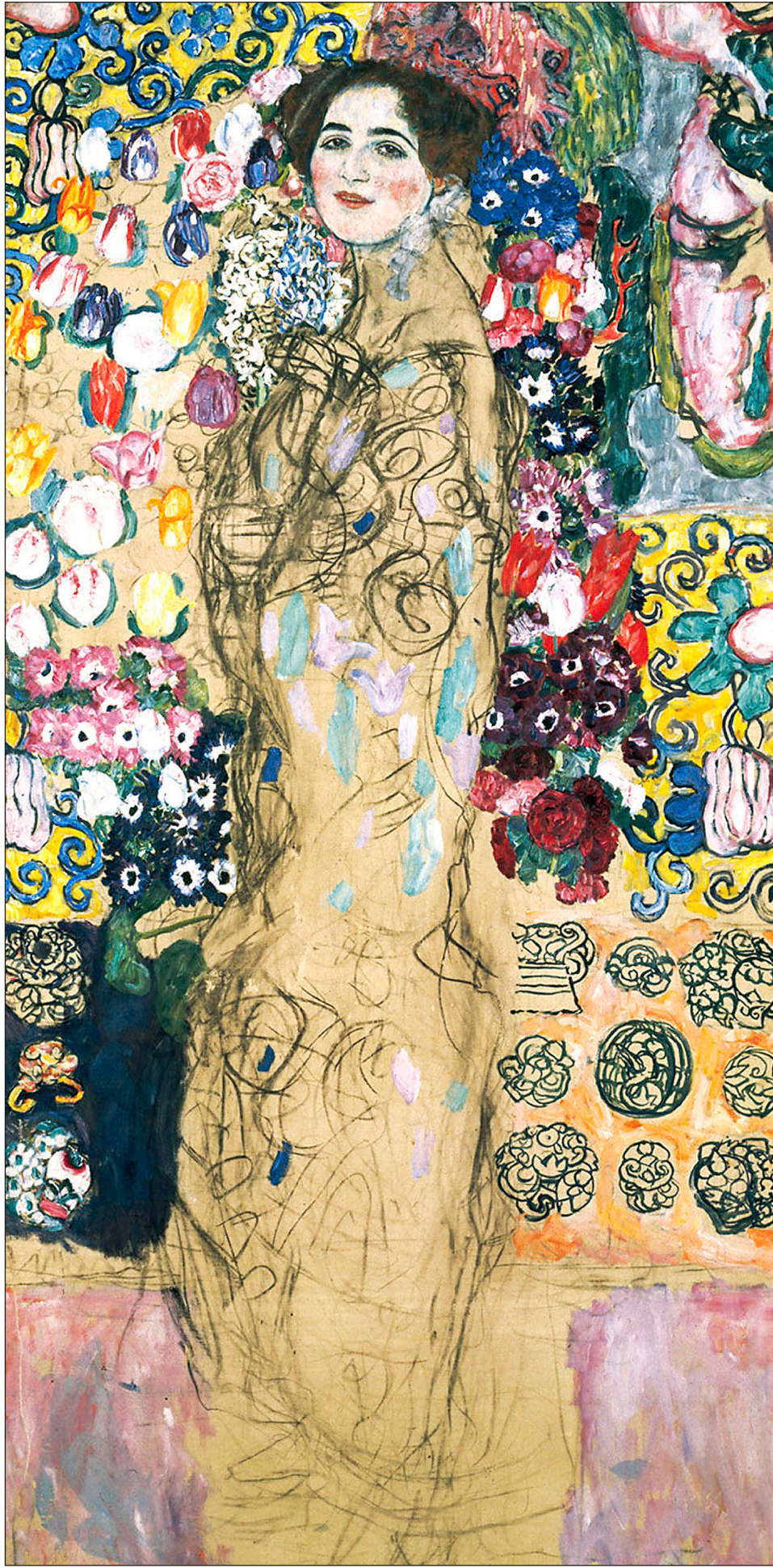
"Most countries have not even undertaken the work which was endorsed in Washington in 1998," said Webber, referring to the non-binding Washington Principles agreed by 44 countries in 1998 as the framework for returning looted art.



Left: *St Maurice and His Companions of the Theban Legion*, by an unknown German artist, is displayed during the media preview of Reclaimed: Paintings from the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker, an exhibition of rarely seen Old Master paintings at the Jewish Museum in New York in March.

Below: Gustav Klimt's painting of Ria Munk is the subject of a dispute between the heirs of a Holocaust victim and a museum in Linz, Austria.

PHOTOS: REUTERS



Under the Washington Principles, countries agreed to identify stolen art, open up archives, publicize suspicious cases and "achieve a just and fair solution" for the Nazi-persecuted pre-war owners or their heirs.

Lawyers and experts say many countries have not enforced the principles and hope they will agree at the Prague conference on a transparent way to report on progress.

One of the main obstacles to art restitution is the difficulty in tracing the provenance and proving the ownership.

Gunnar Schnabel, a German lawyer and author of *Nazi Looted Art*, said museums often "hold back any information they might have" about the murky wartime past of some of their works.

The unique nature of the Nazi regime also makes it difficult to legally define whether art was looted or not.

"The Nazis were very inventive, and thought up lots of ways to expropriate someone of their belongings," said Christoph Bazil, head of Austria's art restitution committee.

For example, Jews were sometimes coerced into selling their art to Nazis and Nazi sympathizers, or forced to sell paintings to fund day-to-day living because they had been forced out of work or because they had to pay discriminatory taxes.

Some people argue that in cases where the original owners of the artworks received money for them, it was a legally valid transaction, while others say the discriminatory Nazi policies imposed on Jews mitigate that validity.

Even when claimants are successful in proving their ownership of an artwork, they have often been unable to retrieve it due to rigid export bans on cultural patrimony.

A Jewish American heiress won a court battle with Hungary in 2000 for the return of art looted by Nazis, including works by Cranach, Van Dyck and El Greco. But the outcome was a Pyrrhic victory, as the works were not allowed to leave the country.

BACKLASH

As art restitution speeds up and returned works of art fetch record sums at auctions and private sales, there are the beginnings of a backlash against the claimants who some say are tracking down their inheritance to sell it for profit.

One of the five Klimt artworks returned to the Bloch-Bauer family a few years ago was sold for US\$135 million, believed to be the highest price ever paid for a painting.

Yet art restitution experts say most looted artworks are worth more sentimentally than financially and are in some cases the only remaining possessions of murdered relatives.

"The few examples of restituted paintings then sold at auctions are of course the ones that everyone talks about, but there are many that stay in the families," said Monika Tatzkow, 54, historian and provenance researcher.

Some say it is time to close the chapter on looted art.

Norman Rosenthal, a former curator at London's Royal Academy of Arts whose own family fled Nazism, has suggested that the issue of Nazi-looted art must now be confined to history, just as with other cases of looted art, during the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, or the Napoleonic Wars.

Supporters of art restitution, however, say Nazi-looted art is unique because it was part of the process of genocide, starting with the elimination of peoples' professional existence and their possessions, and ending with their murder.

Expert Lillie argues museums that benefited from Jewish expropriation and then dragged their feet on art restitution for decades have a moral responsibility to address the issue.

"This is their last chance to try to atone for past wrongs."

Celebrity Interview



Man

CONTINUED FROM P14

TT: So what aspect of tourism should Taiwan try to promote to China?

SY: You have to remember that Taiwanese have influenced China so much — every kind of food in China. If you are talking about breakfast, *yonghe doujiang* (永和豆浆). If you are talking about tea, they say Taiwan has the best quality tea. And you talk about pop singers, from [Theresa] Teng Li-chun (鄧麗君) all the way to [Jolin] Tsai Yi-ling (蔡依林). All the lifestyle of Taiwan has basically been introduced to their life.

TT: Why is it that Taiwan can exercise this kind of influence on China?

SY: During the Cultural Revolution, China was totally blank. So we actually have implanted in their mind the books, literature, temples — all these things from Taiwan. All these things they don't have or are not allowed right now. So when you are thinking about this, we are so rich.

But you have to let them have freedom to go where they want. Not the tour buses going from one city to another.

TT: But what about security concerns?

SY: You have to choose the right people. Why not allow people to come freely but choose the right people? Pick out 12 countries — anyone with a Canadian multiple visa, anyone with a US multiple visa, anyone with residency or multiple visa from Japan — these people have already been screened. These people can come [and be issued a] visa on arrival, except if you are a government official. Just block [them], and let everyone else in.

These people are well educated and sophisticated. They are experienced travelers so we should let them travel freely.

(It's possible that the current administration will heed Yen's suggestions. Yen's expertise in the domestic and international tourism sector resulted in him becoming an official adviser to former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) administration and an unofficial adviser to the current one. But his rise to the top of the industry was particularly remarkable: Yen, who says he was a terrible student — "I was good at doing everything except studying" — had to leave the school system before he could find his "true passion.")

TT: Was it fate or hard work that brought you to where you are today.

SY: I was born at the right time, at the right moment, with the right opportunity. I don't think this experience can be repeated. Forty years ago, for any young person you have two choices: 20 percent go to university and have an assured future. The other 80 percent have to work their way up.

TT: You became a general manager at American Express at a young age. How did you feel about that at the time?

SY: At first I had no confidence. I didn't believe that I could be a good general manager. I was only 28. I was the only one tested in Asia. At that time few young people had this kind of opportunity. After three years I was invited to go to New York at a time when everyone wanted to immigrate to the United States.

I was very grateful that I was able to enter that company at the right time. If I entered today, I probably wouldn't have the same opportunity. At that time the company was small and moving up. And now the company is shrinking and even if you are a messenger today, everyone is a university graduate.

TT: Your own experiences have placed you in an ideal position to speak to Taiwan's youth. What suggestions do you make to them?

SY: I think there is something missing in our education system — even though we do it very well. Taiwan has inherited a lot of culture from China and Japan and other cultures and we have our own style now. But we could do more. Everybody is going to school and getting [a] degree — everyone can get accepted to university now — but we still spend too much time in testing memorization rather than having children from a young age discover their true potential. It could be in art or maybe in literature or maybe in sports, something to build their confidence. Rather than saying, I don't care if you like basketball, that's not going to help you to go to a good university, I say, why can't we get more young people to listen to themselves? And if the education system is not ready for that, they have to start looking for that and find where their true passion is.

TT: This seems to require a shift in perception. Taiwan is in the depths of a recession. Will we ever see a return to the economic growth of the 1980s and 1990s?

SY: Are we still looking for an economic miracle? Are we still looking to make more money? One day we are going to reach a plateau. It's not going to continue. But will our people still be happy with themselves if economically we do not continue to grow? Will people be happy with what they have? I think definitely.

I describe that as a simple lifestyle that has to be introduced into our country. We have to realize that we should not only just keep looking for economic success but we should also see that true value.

TT: How does Taiwan do that?

SY: In the first generation of tourism, most of the time you package something that your people don't even have time to enjoy: Aboriginal trips, etc. But when you reach your full level, [tourists] come and admire our lifestyle.

In another way, China or Hong Kong ... [want] to go see a movie but don't want to be crowded into the theater. They want to go to a 24-hour bookstore ... [or] eat [Taiwanese snacks] (小吃). That's a whole lifestyle and we have already reached that level.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Female strength and beauty

An exhibition of paintings at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York City highlighted the relationship between Taiwan and Honduras

BY STAFF REPORTER

Flowers, butterflies and femininity — these are the themes that were celebrated at Bridging the World Through Art, an exhibition held earlier this month at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York City. The exhibition featured works by painters Lee Chin-chu (李金祝) and Leontina Pineda Lupiac, from Taiwan and Honduras, respectively.

The exhibition is the second in a cooperative project that was initiated last year to highlight the ties between Taiwan and Honduras. This year's event was attended by representatives and ambassadors from 20 countries.

Born in Yunlin, Lee had yet to receive any formal training in painting when she met renowned Taiwanese painter Chang Yi-hsiung (張義雄) at his solo exhibition in 1988. Lee, who was 35 at the time, followed Chang to Paris to study painting. There, she received awards for her work at the city's Spring and Autumn salons in 1990, 1991 and 1992.

Lee is known for her use of bright and vibrant colors. In the oil paintings displayed in New York, she examined feminine beauty with a bold palette of reds and greens that conveys a sense of jubilation and festivity.

Lupiac is herself a story of female strength and courage. A near-fatal car accident in 1999

prompted Lupiac, then 56, to turn to painting as therapy to overcome alcoholism and, later, breast cancer. Now, a decade on, this artist of Spanish, French and indigenous ancestry is widely recognized in the US for a style that blends realism and impressionism, two genres that the artist says draw her closer to God and Nature.



Paintings by Lee Chin-chiu on display at a recent exhibit at the New York Taipei Economic and Cultural Office examine feminine beauty with a bold palette.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF TEO

