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Max Stern Estate Recovers Looted Art in Europe and America

PAINTING FORMERLY IN THE COLLECTION OF GERMAN CHANCELLOR KONRAD ADENAUER UNVEILED

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Circle of Jan Wellens de Cock (c. 1480-1527) *Flight into Egypt*, oil on canvas

More than 70 years after Düsseldorf art dealer, Max Stern, was forced to liquidate his art collection as a result of Nazi persecution, two more of his paintings were finally recovered by his heirs. The Max Stern Estate benefits three major universities (Concordia, McGill University/Montreal, and Hebrew University/Jerusalem) who are committed to recovering Stern's approximately 400 lost artworks. An event marking their return took place on Wednesday, December 10, 2008 at the Berlin offices of the University of Toronto.

One of the paintings, which was publicly presented for the first time in almost forty years, is the Dutch Old Master work *Flight into Egypt* by the Circle of Jan Wellens de Cock (1480-1527). It was lost by Max Stern after he had been banned from his profession in 1935. What happened to the painting soon after is not known, but it subsequently became part of the collection of German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.

The return of this artwork was facilitated by the New York State Banking Department's Holocaust Claims Processing Office and Christie's auction house. "We are delighted to have helped resolve this matter. This is a good example of how cooperation amongst all parties can lead to fair and just solutions to Nazi-looted art cases," said Monica Dugot, Christie's Senior Vice President and International Director of Restitution.

The Estate was able to determine the provenance of the de Cock thanks to recent research undertaken at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) at The Hague. As a further result of this effort, Stern's ownership of more than forty additional Old Master paintings was also established.

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“These RKD discoveries are extremely important. They include information on paintings by artists such as Brueghel, Van Dyck, Ruisdael and Teniers,” said Clarence Epstein, Concordia’s Director of Special Projects and Cultural Affairs and the head of the Max Stern Art Restitution Project. “What is most disconcerting is how many of the paintings from the entire Stern collection remain in circulation in German museums, corporate offices and private collections.”

The second work returned to the Stern Estate is *Girl from the Sabine Mountains* by famed German court painter Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805 –1873). Stern’s ownership of this work was confirmed following a long and precedent-setting, international legal battle that will have an impact on many other art restitution claims. The family of the German-American defendant, Baroness Maria-Louise Bissonnette, had been in possession of the painting since her step-father purchased it at Max Stern’s so-called “Jew sale” at the Lempertz auction house in Cologne in 1937.

In a ruling last month, Judge Bruce M. Selya of the U.S. Court of Appeals wrote “this case has its roots in one of history’s bleakest periods: the Holocaust... A de facto confiscation of a work of art that arose out of a notorious exercise of man’s inhumanity to man now ends with the righting of that wrong... The mills of justice grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. We need go no further.” The case was handled on behalf of the Stern Estate by attorney Thomas Kline from Andrews Kurth LLP.

The Estate is working closely with a number of partners in its search for Stern’s lost artworks including the Art Loss Register in London and the Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste in Magdeburg.

<http://maxsternproject.concordia.ca/>

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