

[MSN] Art treasures and the Gestapo: The casket, the Nazis and why the police came calling at the V&A

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Art treasures and the Gestapo: The casket, the Nazis and why the police came calling at the V&A

By Louise Jury, Arts Correspondent

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For 25 years, this exquisitely enamelled medieval casket had been on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Made in the French city of Limoges in about 1200, it was designed to hold the relics of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury famously murdered in Canterbury Cathedral. It had been on public display until 2000 when it was put into storage while the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries were prepared.

Like its sister work, a slightly earlier Becket casket which was bought with the support of a public appeal 10 years ago for £4.3m, it was likely to have proved one of the centrepieces of the new galleries when they open in a few years' time.

But that looks unlikely now. Earlier this year, The Art Newspaper revealed yesterday, Metropolitan police from the art and antiques squad arrived at the V&A Museum and seized it.

A police spokesman would not confirm details of the case, other than to say: "At approximately 15.30 on 30 January, officers attended an address in South Kensington and removed an item pending inquiries into its history and whether offences were apparent. They were acting on information received."

So what prompted this extraordinary police action at one of Britain's most revered national museums? It followed a claim submitted last November by an aristocratic Polish family, the Czartoryskis, to the British Spoliation Advisory Panel.

The panel is an independent body set up by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport six years ago to help resolve cases involving cultural property lost - or, more accurately, stolen or seized - during the Nazi era and subsequently acquired by British museums and galleries.

Since it was founded, the panel has successfully navigated routes through several tricky claims arising from the Nazis' outrageous looting of precious artwork from its victims - notably, of course, Jewish families.

In the case of the Becket casket, the claimants appear to have decided on

more direct action than negotiation. Although it is not clear who brought in the police, it is unprecedented in this country in living memory for officers to seize an object from a national museum or gallery - with the exception of rare cases of alleged obscenity.

The art and antiques squad appeared to have acted under the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act, which gives them powers to seize an object if there are reasonable grounds for believing it has been obtained where an offence has been committed - such as handling stolen property, for instance.

Inquiries are still continuing and the ramifications being pondered. "The legal situation has now become very complex," said Martin Bailey, who investigated the case for The Art Newspaper.

It is the more complex given the casket's recent ownership. Bailey's inquiries showed that the casket was bought from a private owner in 1954 for the personal collection of Margaret Drey, a Jewish art dealer who ran the FA Drey gallery in London with her husband after they fled Munich before the Second World War. When she died in 1964, the reliquary passed to her son, who offered it on long-term loan to the V&A in 1981. He, too, has since died and it now belongs to his daughter.

The family's solicitor, Jeremy Scott of Withers, said in a statement: "Margaret Drey and her husband, Franz, were very well known for their expertise and integrity as dealers, and had suffered greatly from the events in Germany in the Nazi period.

"The current owner bitterly resents the suggestion in the claim that either of her grandparents could have knowingly or recklessly acquired an item of Nazi loot. She is especially shocked by the heavy-handed involvement of the London police."

The issue in this case may be whether the Drey casket is, indeed, the one stolen from them. There is some suggestion that a 1903 catalogue entry gives a description of the Polish version which differs from that previously seen in the V&A.

But the Czartoryski family have already proved successful in recovering a number of objects which they lost to the Nazis. They are the owners of Poland's finest private collection of art, much of which was once kept at their castle-turned-museum in Goluchow, near Poznan.

When war broke out in 1939, the family hid many of their treasures but Princess Czartoryski was subsequently threatened by the Nazis and forced to reveal their whereabouts. The works were seized and taken to the National Museum in Warsaw - which itself was partly sacked during the uprising in 1944.

In recent years, the Czartoryskis have recovered an important carpet although a significant painting by Raphael, Portrait of a Young Man, remains lost. Much of their collection is now in a museum bearing their name in Krakow.

According to The Art Newspaper investigation, the family's claim to the Becket casket has the backing of the Polish government. The Spoliation Advisory Panel was not available for comment yesterday. But the case raises questions about the future handling of such cases given that the Spoliation Advisory Panel only has powers to act when both parties want it to advise and mediate. As of now, there appears to be nothing more it can do.

A spokeswoman for the V&A confirmed this. "As the casket is no longer in the possession of the V&A we understand that it is now not within the jurisdiction of the Spoliation Advisory Panel."

No one could have expected such cases to be easy to solve when the Government stepped in to try to help six years ago, following a working party of museum directors and galleries chaired by Sir Nicholas Serota of the Tate.

Thousands of works of art were lost and stolen during the war years, starting with forced sales by Jews after Hitler came to power through to the methodical looting carried out by Nazis as they rampaged through Europe. There have been only a handful of claims against British museums and galleries since the panel was established, but each has proved an agonising reminder of how much many victims of the Nazis lost - and how those losses still matter bitterly to their descendants, whatever the value of the art involved.

The latest was made only a few weeks ago for three minor drawings in the Courtauld Institute of Art in London - Architectural Capriccio, attributed to Giuseppe Bibiena, A Lion, attributed to Carl Ruthart and A Dog Lying Down attributed to Frans van Mieris the Elder.

They were part of a bequest of more than 3,000 Old Masters to the institution but have been claimed by the heirs of Dr Arthur Feldmann, whose acclaimed collection was known to have been looted by the Gestapo in 1939. Dr Feldmann, a lawyer from Brno in former Czechoslovakia, and his wife, Gisela, were subsequently killed by the Nazis.

His heirs have already claimed four Old Master drawings from the collection of the British Museum which have been the subject of much wrangling. Lawyers for the museum agreed in principle to their restitution four years ago, but as the museum is not allowed to dispose of any works in its collection, the Attorney General ruled that the museum could not legally return them. This ruling prompted calls for a change in the law. Meanwhile, the heirs and the British Museum have continued to talk.

A museum spokeswoman said: "The claim, which has been recognised by the trustees of the British Museum, is currently with the Spoliation Advisory Panel. The hope on both sides is that financial compensation settlement can be agreed so the drawings will remain part of our collection. We are awaiting the SAP's response."

Other galleries have already paid to keep works in their collection. The Burrell Collection in Glasgow paid £10,000 compensation to keep Le Pate de Jambon, a still life attributed to a follower of Pierre Chardin. The first case to be settled under the system, in 2001, saw the Government award £125,000 compensation to three elderly Londoners for A View of Hampton Court Palace by Jan Griffier the Elder, which their mother was forced to sell during her escape from the Nazis.

In other cases, works have been returned. The British Library and the Spoliation Panel agreed that a rare manuscript known as the Benevento Missal should go back to the Chapter Library in Benevento, Italy.

The fear now will be whether the system is in danger of breaking down. A spokeswoman for the DCMS said "concerns had been noted" by the Spoliation Advisory Panel after the Czartoryski claim was placed in the hands of the police. If more cases emerged, then there would have to be discussions about whether changes needed to be made to procedures.

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