Austria to Relinquish Klimt Paintings

In a dramatic conclusion to a nearly eight-year-long legal struggle that, along the way, has involved the Austrian government, the U.S. Supreme Court and murky doings in Nazi-occupied Vienna, an Austrian arbitration court ruled in January that five paintings by Gustav Klimt are the rightful property of Maria Altmann, a 90-year-old resident of Los Angeles. Altmann's claim to the paintings rests on the fact that she is the sole heir of Adele Bloch-Bauer, a Viennese culture through her artistic patronage and vibrant salon. Since 1938, Altmann has sought via Austrian and U.S. courts to restitute the paintings away from the Austrian Gallery in Vienna's Belvedere Castle, where they have hung since the Nazis seized them in 1938. Following the German annexation of Austria in 1938, the art collections of many Austrian Jews were stolen. Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, a cornerstone of the Austrian Gallery's collection, is widely recognized as one of Klimt's most important paintings. Immediately after the war, the Austrian government pressured the Bloch-Bauer family to relinquish ownership of the Klimts in exchange for permission to take other works out of the country. The passing of a new Austrian law in 1998 obliged the country's museums to restitute Nazi-looted art gave Altmann renewed hope that she might recover the paintings, but her initial efforts to sue in Austrian courts were stymied by any knowledge of wrongdoing and would not be the target of a lawsuit. Italian officials sold the press that if the Met did not respond to the proposal by February, they might further investigate the museum's acquisitions.

Among the items in question are a 5th-century B.C. vase and a group of Hellenistic silver objects. According to the tentative agreement, those pieces would remain on loan at the museum through the end of 2007, and would be displayed with a label identifying them as property of the Italian state. After their return to Italy, the works would be available for loan again in 2012. Also specified in the proposal are four terra-cotta pieces that are linked to convicted dealer Giacomo Medici; they will not be replaced with special loans. Perhaps taking his cue from de Montebello, in mid-January the Getty's new director, Michael Brand, entered into negotiations with Italian officials in an attempt to hammer out a similar agreement regarding 42 objects at the Getty, 12 of which are from the collection of trustee and New York resident Barbara Fleischman and her late husband, Lawrence. According to the Los Angeles Times, True set up a 1996 arrangement with the Fleischmans in which the couple sold 30 objects to the Getty for $20 million and donated some 300 more works: $40 million. The works, prominently featured in the newly reopened Getty Villa, were largely obtained from Medici and Hecht.

Within weeks of the Fleischman deal, True borrowed $400,000 from the couple to repay an undocumented loan, obtained via a Greek lawyer and a now-deceased London antiquities dealer who was a Getty supplier, for the purchase of a vacation home in Greece. Revelation of that loan, on the heels of the Italian lawsuits, led to True's resignation from the Getty last September. The more recent revelation of the subsequent loan prompted Fleischman to resign from the board in January.

—Stephanie Cash

Antiquities Settlement on the Horizon for the Met and Getty?

As Italy continues its dogged pursuit of antiquities looted from its soil, American museums are beginning to negotiate arrangements with Italian culture ministry officials to obviate legal actions like the one taken against the Getty Museum and its former curator Marion True [see "Artworld," Nov. '05], who is currently standing trial in Italy with art dealer Robert Hecht. At press time, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art was working out a deal whereby the museum would return 20 disputed works in exchange for long-term loans of equal value and historical importance from Italy. The proposal is reportedly the result of talks between Met director Philippe de Montebello and Italian officials. According to documents obtained by the New York Times, the museum would disclaim any knowledge of wrongdoing and would not be the target of a lawsuit. Italian officials told the press that if the Met did not respond to the proposal by February, they might further investigate the museum's acquisitions.

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Lost & Found

Winter brought mixed news on the European art-heist front, as one major work was recovered and a raft of others disappeared.

Benvenuto Cellini
On Jan. 22, an exquisite gold-and-ebony saltcellar by Benvenuto Cellini, stolen in 2003 from Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum [see "Front Page," July '03], was found buried in a wooded area north of the city, after the man who filched it, a security systems salesman, Robert Mang, 50, was apprehended by police. Cellini's Saliera (1540-43), depicting the nude Neptune and Ceres cavorting in the waves, with a small basin floating nearby to hold salt, is the only authenticated work in gold by the 16th-century sculptor and memoirist, famed for his skill in precious metals. Valued at an estimated $60 million, it is among the most important works in the Kunsthistorisches collection.

Mang was brazen. In the wee morning hours, having climbed up a scaffolding erected around the museum for sandblasting, he broke through a second-story window, shattered the glass case in which the sculpture was displayed, and fled with the work. The museum came under sharp criticism for lax security. Although a motion detector had registered the break-in, a security guard turned off the alarm, never investigating why it had been triggered. Mang kept the piece under his bed for two years (it measures approximately 10 by 15 inches) before selling it, fearing apprehension. During that time, he made two very complex attempts to collect a ransom of $12 million from the insurance company (once sending Neptune's tiny trident as proof he had the object in his possession). He was finally arrested after a surveillance tape caught him buying the cell phone used to make a last, incriminating contact.

Henry Moore & Lynn Chadwick
Mang had seen the Saliera during a guided tour of the museum and evidently developed something of an affection for it (the work was found to be only slightly scratched after its years in his custody). More chilling...
Police say that someday the motives to be operating in a spate of thefts of large-scale outdoor sculptures in bronze, some 20 of which have been stolen from around the London area over the past year. Among the most spectacular heists was that of a 2-ton Henry Moore Reclining Figure (1969), recovered during the night of Dec. 15 from the grounds of the Henry Moore Foundation, Perry Green, Hertfordshire. Equally bizarre, one of three 6-foot figures in The Watchers (1960) by Lynn Chadwick was hacked off at the feet and likewise spirited away during the night, this time from Rhodehampton University in southwest London on Jan. 10. In these and the other cases, police say the thieves drove vans or flatbed trucks to the sites to remove the works. In the Moore case, they used a crane to lift the piece—hardly a subtle operation. The prognosis is grim: investigators believe that thieves plan to melt the sculptures down for scrap metal. Prices for scrap metal have risen in the past few years, but still represent only a fraction of the sculptures' value as art.

The Moire, for example, is worth some $5,000,000 in detail, but will bring a mere $5,000 as scrap.

Richard Serra & Anish Kapoor

Meanwhile, the Reina Sofia in Madrid admitted on Jan. 17 that a 38-ton, four-part Richard Serra sculpture, Equal-Parallels/Guernica-Bengasi, commissioned by the museum in 1986 and purchased the following year, has gone missing. The work was on display until 1990, when it was placed in a warehouse for the storage of large-scale pieces. Recently, the museum wished to show the Serra again, but discovered that the company that had stored it had gone into receivership in 1998. There is no trace of the sculpture, and investigators fear that the work may be lost for good. Back in London, another high-end storage firm, Fine Arts Logistics, is being sued by Geneva collector Ofir Segal for the disappearance of its warehouse of art in cement and wood by Anish Kapoor, Hole and Vessel (1984), purchased not long ago by Segal, was in storage pending restoration by the artist.

Edvard Munch

Police may have been clever It may have been more of a case of the museum's inaction becoming clear, the fear is that the paintings may have since been destroyed.

Caravaggio

On a potentially happier note, the French press was offered in late January that two paintings hanging for two centuries in an organ loft in the church of St. Anthony in Loches, in the Loire Valley, are believed to be the work of Caravaggio. They are thought to belong to a group of four paintings purchased from the artist by a French minister for Henry IV. Philippe de Bethune, who was an avid collector, Confiscated during the French Revolution, they were given to the parish in 1813. In 1999, curators noticed a coat of arms in the paintings that led to further studies. The works, depicting the Supper at Emmaus and the Incredulity of Thomas, have been scientifically analyzed by Caravaggio specialist Jos Fruiches, who pronounced them authentic based on their provenance and on technical clues. However, Pierre Rosenberg, former director of the Louvre, is not convinced; he believes them to be copies of paintings hanging elsewhere, at the National Gallery in London and Samsouci Palace near Potsdam.

Duchamp's Dada Pistoi Assailed

On Jan. 4, Marcel Duchamp's Fountain was vandalized while on view in the "Dada" exhibition at the Pompudoid Center in Paris. Pierre Pinoncelli, a 77-year-old French performance artist, was arrested at the scene after hitting the work with a small hammer. The porcelain ready-made, a gift from Duchamp to a Russian friend in 1917, was chipped and is being restored. Another signed replica, from among a total of eight, had already been selected for display in the U.S. version of the exhibition, which opened Feb. 9 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. [through May 14], and travels to the Museum of Modern Art in New York [June 18–Sept. 11].

Pinoncelli, who maintains that his attack on the work was a form of Dada action, was fined approximately $262,000 by a French court and given a three-month suspended sentence. When the same urinal was on view in a 1993 show at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes, Pinoncelli urinated into it, saying that he wanted to return the piece to its original function as the official urinal for the summer to 1915. For that incident, he was jailed for a month and fined about $37,500. The Duchamp piece seems an irresistible target for attention-seekers. In 2000, two Chinese artists also urinated on the Tate Modern's version of the work.